

CHICKENS BRED FOR MEAT - BROILERS

Current situation

Around 7 billion broilers are reared for meat in the EU every year. They have undergone intensive selection for faster growth and for traits that are desirable for meat production reducing the normal slaughter age for broilers to only five or six weeks. The majority of broilers are raised in large insulated buildings with controlled environments including artificial light. The barren environment, the low lighting levels and high stocking density restrict their opportunity to perform exploratory behaviours. When stocking densities exceed 30 kg/m² (15 birds per m² at a slaughter weight of two kilograms), serious welfare problems are likely to arise, regardless of the quality of management or the housing specifications³⁸. Before the implementation of the new directive in June 2010 the average density currently used by the industry in the EU was 40 kg/m², and even in some countries (e.g. Belgium and France) up to 45kg/m².

Although consumers are becoming increasingly aware of both the ways animals are kept and production methods, many people still do not know about the welfare problems suffered by chickens bred for meat.

A high proportion of broilers suffer from leg problems due to their fast growth rate. In addition, broilers can suffer from heart failure, sudden death syndrome or ascites when they are only a few weeks old due to the excessive pressure put on their hearts as a result of the fast growth. Other welfare problems are related to the quality of stockmanship and care. For example, floor litter can become wet and ammonia-laden, resulting in breast blisters and hock and foot pad burns.

Apart from the conditions under which the chickens are reared for slaughter, there is also considerable concern over the welfare of the breeding stock. Among broiler breeders, feed intake is restricted to slow the growth rate of which the strain is capable under normal production conditions, causing hunger and the development of abnormal behaviour. Male breeder chicks are beak-trimmed to avoid side effects of the rearing system such as feather pecking, their spurs, combs and pivot claws may also be removed³⁹. Catching, crating and transportation of birds for sale or slaughter can cause damage and considerable suffering.

³⁸/The Welfare of Chickens kept for meat production (Broilers). Report of the Scientific Committee on Animal Health and Animal Welfare, March 2000, 149 p.

³⁹/Report on the Welfare of Broiler Breeders, Farm Animal Welfare Council, MAFF, 1998

The European Food Safety Authority recently gave two scientific opinions, one on the influence of genetic selection on the welfare of broilers⁴⁰ and the other on the influence of housing and management⁴¹ on the welfare of broiler breeders.

“For broilers, the major welfare concerns identified and associated with genetic selection were skeletal disorders leading to problems such as lameness, contact dermatitis, irregular body shape and sudden death syndrome. These concerns are mostly linked to fast growth rates and lead to poor welfare.”

The experts highlight that the welfare of broilers could be improved, particularly if birds are genetically selected to withstand the environment they live in; for example, birds that grow more slowly should be selected for hot climates as fast growing broilers are susceptible to heat stress. Moreover, in the genetic selection of chickens, high priority should be given to decreasing the number of lame birds and reducing contact dermatitis.

Due to selection for fast growth and high muscle yields, breeders have a very high food intake. Feed restrictions are therefore necessary to limit growth rate to maintain good health. Experts recommend that the competition for food (which can be observed among chickens when feed is not provided) should be minimised thereby reducing related injuries. Experts also recommend that birds requiring fewer feed restrictions should be selected as future breeders.

For breeders, experts identify five major risks factors having an impact on welfare related to management or genetic selection. Management factors are barren environment, density of animals, feed restriction and limited sources of light, and the genetic factor is fast growth rate. There are also welfare concerns resulting from the interaction between genetics and the environment.

The EFSA opinion states that providing stimuli such as perches and raised nest boxes are beneficial for the welfare of broilers kept for breeding. They also recommend that management practices aimed at reducing injuries -- such as removing part of the toe or comb -- should either not be carried out or, if necessary, only by trained personnel using the least painful method.

Legislation

Council of Europe

The Standing Committee of the *European Convention for the Protection of Farm Animals* adopted in 1992 a revised *Recommendation concerning Domestic Fowl (Gallus gallus)*. This replaced the earlier version from 1986 and includes broiler chickens, as well as laying hens. It deals with stockmanship and inspection, enclosures, buildings and equipment, general management, genetic selection, and mutilations such as beak trimming. It strongly urges that primary breeding of pedigree stock should pay attention to health and welfare, as well as to productivity criteria.

European Union

Council Directive 2007/43/EC lays down minimum rules for the protection of chickens kept for meat production. It does not apply to flocks with less than 500 birds, to those birds reared as extensive indoor (barn reared chickens reared at stocking densities less than 25kg/m² and slaughtered at 56 days of age or later), free range or organic, or to breeding stocks.

⁴⁰/EFSA Panel on Animal Health and Welfare (AHAW); Scientific Opinion on the influence of genetic parameters on the welfare and the resistance to stress of commercial broilers. EFSA Journal 2010;8(7):1666. [82 pp.] doi:10.2903/j.efa.2010.1666

⁴¹/EFSA Panel on Animal Health and Welfare (AHAW); Scientific Opinion on welfare aspects of the management and housing of the grand-parent and parent stocks raised and kept for breeding purposes. EFSA Journal 2010;8(7):1667. [81 pp.] doi:10.2903/j.efa.2010.1667

It introduces limits on stocking density of 33 to 39kg/m², depending on the conditions in which broilers are kept; requirements for the training of keepers; and the development of good management practice guides. Producers who stock up to the lower density have to comply with standards relating to drinkers, feeding, litter, ventilation, noise, light and inspection. Producers who seek to stock up to a maximum of 39 kg/m² will have to comply with an additional set of standards. There is also a system whereby this upper limit can be increased by 3 kg, to a maximum of 42kg/m², providing the mortality rate is below a given threshold and if there have been no infringements of the Directive for 2 years.

The Directive requested the Commission to prepare a report, not later than 31 December 2009, on the possible introduction of a specific harmonized mandatory labelling scheme for chicken meat, meat products and preparations, based on compliance with animal welfare standards. The report was due to be accompanied by appropriate legislative proposals taking into account the experience gained by the Member States in applying voluntary labelling schemes. At the moment this report has still not been published.

The Commission must also submit a report on the influence of genetic parameters on identified deficiencies resulting in poor welfare of chickens, by 31 December 2010. It may be accompanied by appropriate legislative proposals, if necessary. This report will be based on the EFSA scientific opinions, adopted in June 2010.

In addition, by 30 June 2012, the Commission must present a report concerning the application of the Directive and its influence on the welfare of chickens, as well as the development of welfare indicators. This report must take into account new scientific evidence and the different production conditions and methods, as well as the socioeconomic and administrative implications of this Directive.

Directive 2007/43/EC has been transposed into Member States' national law and implemented since 30 June 2010.

Under Regulation (EC) No 543/2008⁴² on marketing standards for poultry meat, four systems of keeping poultry are defined for optional labelling. These are 'extensive indoor' (or 'barn reared'), 'free range', 'traditional free range' and 'free range-total freedom'. These terms are defined in an annex and relate to maximum stocking densities, age at slaughter and access to outdoor runs. However, the similarity of the labelling terms is confusing to the consumer, and furthermore there seems to be no easily understandable relationship to the basic forms of poultry rearing in current use: highly intensive controlled indoor environments; less intensive indoor systems, in which slower growing birds are reared; and free range, which allows birds access to outdoor foraging areas.

Action needed

- Community labelling terms and criteria indicating methods of farm production for poultry should be revised and brought into line with welfare legislation.
- The report due before 31 December 2009 on the possible introduction of a specific harmonized mandatory labelling scheme for chicken meat, meat products and preparations, based on compliance with animal welfare standards has to be published.
- There is an urgent need to protect the welfare of breeding stocks. Now that EFSA has published its scientific opinion on this topic the European Commission must prepare legislative proposals without delay.
- Practical implementation of the Directive 2007/43 seems to pose problems in some member states and risks of inconsistency in enforcement would lead to distortion of competition and this must be resolved.
- The European Commission should clarify the methods to calculate the maximum stocking density and the exact conditions to be allowed to stock up to 42kg/m².

⁴²/Commission Regulation (EC) No 543/2008 of 16 June 2008 laying down detailed rules for the application of Council Regulation (EC) No 1234/2007 as regards the marketing standards for poultry meat