



Chickens bred for meat

Background

Around 840 million meat chickens or 'broilers' were reared last year in the UK (Defra statistics, 2007) - making them by far the most numerous produced farm animals for meat. Around 85% of all chickens are reared in large, closed, buildings, where temperature, artificial lighting, ventilation, food and water are all controlled to ensure birds grow efficiently. Typically, around 25,000 birds are housed together within a shed, but some buildings can house 50,000 birds or more.

The welfare concerns:

Fast growth

Meat chickens have been selected to grow fast so as to produce the maximum amount of meat in the shortest possible time. The time from when they first hatch to appearing on supermarket shelves can be around just five weeks. They can put on weight so rapidly they can suffer from severe health problems such as lameness (leg problems) and heart defects.

The RSPCA solution: The industry should select genetically slower-growing breeds of birds to help minimise the risk of severe health problems. The three main global chicken breeders have developed (or are developing) slower growing breeds to meet the RSPCA welfare standards. Retailers and producers therefore have little excuse not to source these.

Space

The number of birds kept in a shed can be so high that they end up with very little room to move around. Current industry standards allocate each bird less floor space than an A4 piece of paper. Around 19 birds weighing 2kg may occupy each square metre of floor space, which is equivalent to 38kg of body weight per square metre. Reduced space limits the bird's ability to move around and perform other natural behaviour.

The RSPCA solution: Reduce stocking density to a maximum of 30kg per square metre.

Lighting

Lighting is kept deliberately low in the sheds to discourage activity. Low light levels can give rise to poor eye health and even blindness. Birds may have just four hours of darkness per day giving only a very short time for proper rest. Extending the light period encourages birds to eat and therefore grow as fast as possible.

The RSPCA solution: Increase lighting levels during the day to encourage greater activity and provide at least six hours of continuous darkness per day to allow birds' proper rest. The RSPCA welfare standards now insist on producers installing windows into the sheds, hence giving the birds natural daylight.

Behaviour

Most chickens are kept in barren sheds with limited opportunity to express natural behaviours such as perching, pecking, and exploratory behaviour.

The RSPCA solution: Enrich the bird's environment to encourage greater activity and the performance of natural behaviour. For example, perches and straw bales can be provided.

Current legislation for meat chickens

Council Directive 2007/43/EC gained political agreement at Agriculture Council in May 2007.¹ The Directive sets out minimum standards for the protection of chickens reared for meat. It is the first piece of legislation specifically concerning meat chickens. Approximately 4 billion meat chickens are produced each year across the EU and they will be covered by these regulations from 30 June 2010.

The RSPCA is highly critical of this weak piece of legislation which is wholly inadequate in attempting to address and improve many of the very serious welfare issues associated with rearing chickens for meat production. For example, the Directive will permit producers to stock chickens at 42kg per square metre (21 2kg

¹ Council Directive laying down minimum rules for the protection of chickens kept for meat production

birds per square metre), a density which is unacceptable to ensure good welfare, and has done nothing to address the serious welfare issues associated with fast growth rates. However, the Directive is a first step towards protecting meat chickens. It will bring some common standards for the treatment of chickens across Europe, and there are some elements that will improve upon typical industry practice in some countries. But it is only a first step in a process to improve the welfare of today's meat chicken, and it is hoped it will eventually be strengthened.

The government has confirmed that there will be a consultation on transposing the Directive into UK law.² Current industry standards (ACP, labelled Red Tractor) do not allow producers to plan to stock chickens at more than 38kg per square metre. As the Directive will allow producers to stock up to 42kg per square metre, the RSPCA is worried that this will mean current standards in the UK will be weakened. The RSPCA will be calling on industry and government to keep these standards in place at the very least rather than weaken the current situation as the Directive would permit.

Consumers

Recent polls have shown that consumers are particularly concerned about meat chicken welfare – 83% stated that they expect the retailer to ensure that all the chickens they sell are reared to higher welfare standards.³ A European Commission poll showed that 78% felt that meat chickens are kept in poor or very poor conditions.⁴

Statistics show that the total number of chickens reared to higher welfare standards increased by **559%** between 2004 to 2007. This figure is expected to rise even further this year, in the light of heightened public awareness following Channel 4 programmes by Hugh Fearnley Whittingstall and Jamie Oliver. Many supermarkets are already reporting huge

increases in the amount of higher welfare chicken being sold.

Freedom Food

The RSPCA's Freedom Food scheme is the only UK farm assurance and food-labelling scheme dedicated to improving farm animal welfare. As a charity Freedom Food is completely independent from the food industry and has one main aim – to improve the welfare of farm animals. The scheme currently includes over 44 million chickens bred for meat. The RSPCA welfare standards for chickens aim to rear chickens to higher welfare standards in all systems of production i.e. indoor, free-range and organic.

Cost

The RSPCA understands that the price of food is a real concern for the general public. Farms approved by Freedom Food also produce indoor-reared birds which adhere to RSPCA standards which specify a slower growth rate, more space, brighter-lit conditions and a more enriched environment for the chickens. These indoor-reared chickens are not as expensive as free range birds and cost on average only £1 extra than standard chicken. Freedom Food indoor-reared chickens are priced mid-way between standard chicken and free-range, therefore it is a more affordable option, the difference being as little as 20p in some supermarkets.

To find out which chicken the RSPCA recommend you buy, download the Good Chicken Guide at www.rspca.org.uk/chicken or text CHICKEN 60022 to get the guide direct to your mobile.

Call to action

Please write to the Animal Welfare Minister Jane Kennedy MP and ask her to take the RSPCA's views into account when the Broilers Directive is transposed into UK law later this year.

² Hansard, 10 Dec 2007, Column 40W

³ TNS/RSPCA, 2006. Results are based on phone interviews with 1,013 adults, aged 16+, on 12-14 May 2006

⁴ European Commission, 2005, Attitudes of consumers towards the welfare of farmed animals, Eurobarometer survey.