

Animal Welfare Reports

Farm Animal Welfare

Farm Animal Welfare Council (FAWC): Report on the Welfare of Farmed Animals at Slaughter or Killing Part 2: White Meat Animals (May 2009)

General

The Farm Animal Welfare Council (FAWC) *Report on the Welfare of Farmed Animals at Slaughter or Killing Part 2: White Meat Animals* ('The Report') concerns the welfare of poultry, specifically meat chickens, laying hens, turkeys, ducks, geese, gamebirds and rabbits in the last few hours of their lives up to the moment of slaughter or killing. It examines the experiences of poultry during catching and loading on the farm, the journey to the slaughterhouse, the wait in the lairage, unloading from transport containers, stunning and slaughter as well as the circumstances in which poultry are slaughtered. It is the second part to a 2003 Report concerning the slaughter of Red Meat Species and also reinforces the findings of the 1982 *Welfare of Poultry at the Time of Slaughter* Report. It sets out six principles for humane slaughter and killing, namely:

- All personnel involved with slaughter or killing must be trained, competent and caring;
- Only those animals that are fit should be caught, loaded and transported to the slaughterhouse;
- Any handling of animals prior to slaughter must be done with consideration for the animal's welfare;
- In the slaughterhouse, only equipment that is fit for the purpose must be used;

- Prior to slaughter or killing an animal, either it must be rendered unconscious and insensible to pain instantaneously or unconsciousness must be induced without pain or distress;
- Animals must not recover consciousness until death ensues.

The Report estimates that approximately 839 million fowl (including meat chickens and end-of-lay hens), 15 million turkeys and 17 million ducks and geese are killed in Great Britain each year. It notes that farm animals are recognised as sentient beings in the Treaty of Rome (1957) and the Treaty of Amsterdam (1997) and that as a result, a moral obligation is owed to each individual animal used for human purposes.

The Report notes that cattle, sheep and other red meat species are slaughtered in relatively small numbers, whereas the throughput of many poultry slaughter systems is very high (over 10,000 birds per hour) which can lead to animals being treated as commodities rather than individual sentient beings. It stresses that abattoir workers should be aware that they are dealing with sentient animals in their daily work and be adequately trained to carry out their work compassionately.

The Report also highlights that the majority of poultry that are killed in

Great Britain originate on farms operated by large, integrated companies which generally operate their own slaughterhouses. Catching gangs are frequently comprised of company or contracted workers who catch and transport birds from company-owned or independent farms to the slaughterhouse. In contrast, slaughterhouses that operate seasonally, such as those that process turkeys and geese are normally independent. Small scale or seasonal farmers kill birds on their farms or transport them locally for slaughter in seasonal facilities. There is one slaughterhouse in Great Britain designated for the slaughter of rabbits for human consumption, processing less than 10,000 animals per year.

The Welfare of Animals (Slaughter or Killing) Regulations 1995 regulates animal welfare at slaughter or killing in Great Britain and implements the EU Slaughter Directive (93/119/EC). A proposal for a new Slaughter Regulation was issued in October 2008. Since the coming into force in all EU Member States on 1 January 2006 of new food hygiene regulations, slaughterhouses must be approved by the Food Standards Agency (FSA) and monitored by the Meat Hygiene Service (MHS). This is not the case for poultry slaughterhouses handling less than 10,000 birds per annum, though these must still be registered

with the FSA and are subject to Local Authority enforcement controls.

The recent Meat Chicken Directive (Council Directive 2007/43/EC) is set to be implemented in domestic legislation in 2010 and specifies certain growing conditions, stocking densities and a requirement to monitor mortality and post mortem/reject data at processing to aid assessment of on-farm welfare.

The Report suggests that a prescriptive approach to the slaughter methods allowed in the *Welfare of Animals (Slaughter or Killing) Regulations 1995*, whilst easier to enforce, may stifle innovation. Hence it argues that legislation should be drafted in such a way that promising developments can be readily authorised for commercial use after assessment of their effect on bird welfare.

The Report states that the Council was pleased to have seen publication by the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (DEFRA) of updated guidance on the welfare of poultry at slaughter or killing but also indicated a desire for this guidance to be converted into a statutory Code of Practice once the EU Slaughter Directive has been reviewed and incorporated into domestic legislation.

Welfare issues:

The Report notes that birds are particularly sensitive to extremes of temperature and humidity that can be experienced when they are confined in crates during transport or at the lairage. Ideally, poultry should undergo an ante-mortem *veterinary* inspection on the farm before they are caught rather than simply being the subject of the *farmer's* ante-mortem production report which is used by the Official Veterinarian when assessing the birds upon arrival at the slaughterhouse.

In the event that the flock inspection determines that the flock is showing signs of ill-health, catching and transporting them should not take place. Hence, end-of-lay hens with obvious injuries or birds suffering from painful lameness should not be transported. Birds that cannot stand or walk should be culled from the farm as should severely lame birds or those that are in pain.

Responsibility for the welfare of the birds at all stages needs to be clear amongst all involved such as the farm's owner, manager and staff. Indeed, the Report notes that current legislation requires people handling animals during loading, unloading and transport to be trained and considers that this legislative requirement should also be extended to catching teams.

Exploring the work of catching teams in greater detail, the Report recommends that birds, particularly those with weak bone strength, should be caught and carried by two legs and should only be inverted for the shortest distance and time possible with smooth and careful movements to avoid unnecessary wing flapping. However, the Report also suggests that industry should consider adopting systems that allow end-of-lay hens in particular to be killed or slaughtered *in situ* rather than being caught and transported.

The Report further suggests that animals should be slaughtered or killed as close to the farm as possible with the total journey not exceeding more than 15 hours from the time of loading the first bird to unloading the last bird. Before a driver accepts a consignment of birds, it is their responsibility to be satisfied that the birds are fit for transport.

It appears from the Report's findings that the factors which may affect the quality of the journey for birds

include handling during loading of the modules in which they are transported, the stocking density of the modules, vehicle design particularly ventilation, the type of roads and how the vehicle is driven during the journey, weather conditions, vehicle breakdowns and delays due to road works or heavy traffic. EU Directive 853/2004 requires that animal crates and modules be made of non-corrosive material and be easy to clean and disinfect.

The Report notes that the responsibility for assessing animals on delivery to the slaughterhouse lies with the slaughterhouse operator, the Official Veterinarian and the Poultry Welfare Officer (PWO). It argues that slaughterhouse operators should record any injuries and the number of dead-on-arrival birds as part of their welfare controls and that these records should be used to identify persistent problems with particular farms, catching teams or haulers.

Legislation requires that if slaughter or killing is delayed, then if necessary, drinking water should be available and feed should be provided twice daily. The Official Veterinarian, in conjunction with the slaughterhouse operator and any other veterinary advisor, should decide whether to hold birds in the lairage or, in exceptional circumstances, return them to the farm. These assessments should be based on a risk assessment that delivers the best outcome for the birds' welfare.

Once birds are delivered to the slaughterhouse, they are prepared for stunning prior to slaughter. The Report notes that live shackling, whereby birds are removed by hand from transport modules and hung inverted in a metal shackle, so as to present the head for stunning in a water-bath, is commonly used in slaughterhouses employing electrical stunning. The Report notes that both practical experience and scientific

evidence show that current systems of inversion and live shackling raise significant welfare concerns. The pain associated with shackling has also been the subject of research since the Council's *Report on the Welfare of Poultry at the Time of Slaughter* (1982). This research confirms that shackling is likely to be extremely painful for birds. The inversion and shackling of ducks, geese and turkeys is also contrary to good practice described in the Code of Recommendations for the Welfare of Livestock and the Report expresses a preference for such large, heavy birds not being inverted or shackled at all. It suggests that in the long term, current systems of pre-slaughter inversion and shackling of all poultry should be phased out.

The Report also cautions against government acceptance of automated shackling devices which are presently being developed in the United States, preferring that these only be used in the case of dead birds.

The Report notes that the maximum period that birds can be hung in shackles before reaching the stunner in Great Britain is half that in other EU countries, namely, three minutes for turkeys and two minutes for other poultry. Whilst industry may not welcome new legislation to reduce this period further, the Report prefers that the 'hang-on' period be as short as possible.

Concerning the stunning itself, the Report indicates that the Council favours the use of stun-to-kill electrical systems as, although the high voltage required to kill may cause poor meat quality, by preventing a possible recovery to consciousness, it delivers certainty that a bird's welfare cannot be affected once the stun has been administered. In practice, the lower, standard current applied to each bird does not necessarily produce immediate unconsciousness until

death by bleeding. Instead, birds with a high electrical resistance may not be stunned adequately while those with low resistance may have strong muscular spasms leading to bone breakage.

The Report also notes that a significant proportion of broiler chickens are killed using controlled atmosphere systems in Great Britain and that the major turkey processors are now using controlled atmosphere systems. In this context, the Report urges that every bird be exposed to the gas concentration that renders it insensible to pain and distress until the moment of death. Monitoring and control of gas concentration throughout the gas enclosure are essential (and are usually done automatically). Most enclosures also have observation windows as birds enter the system. It is a requirement of the *Welfare of Animals (Slaughter or Killing) Regulations 1995* that there be a means of monitoring birds visually and industry should not operate substantially closed systems where neither the Official Veterinarian nor the slaughterman can see the birds under normal conditions or when a problem arises.

It is suggested that a major advantage of controlled atmosphere systems is the avoidance of inversion and live shackling as well as the risk of insufficient electrical current. However, the Report argues that these advantages should not lead to new welfare problems associated with the gas mixture used such as gasping caused by carbon dioxide inhalation.

In relation to the slaughter process, the Report asserts that the stun-to-cut interval must be as short as possible to ensure that death by loss of blood takes place before any return to consciousness. The major blood vessels of the neck, including both carotid arteries should be cut to ensure rapid exsanguination for all

recoverable methods of stunning. The Report expresses its support for the EU Commission's proposals for a new Slaughter Regulation that would require the cutting of both carotid arteries and calls on government to support this.

In a discrete section of the Report concerning licensing and training, the Council argues that the skill and performance of the slaughterman are crucial to the welfare of the animal during slaughter. It indicates a desire for a review to be undertaken of the system of licensing slaughtermen, including those involved in emergency killing. It notes that the certificate of competence which must be held by a slaughterman in order for him to be issued with a license is issued by the Official Veterinarian who also has a basic training function. The Report indicates that the Council is convinced that the training, accreditation and enforcement roles of the Official Veterinarian do not sit comfortably together. EC Transport Regulation 1/2005 requires that examiners of drivers for their certificate of competence must be independent. Similarly, the Report argues that a license to slaughter should only be awarded to those who have achieved a level of competence that has been assessed independently.

Finally, as mentioned above, slaughterhouses also contain PWOs who are responsible (in the absence of the occupier of a particular slaughterhouse) for the welfare of animals and have authority to take whatever action may be necessary to safeguard the welfare of the animals. The Report suggests that the role of the PWO is crucial to the identification and monitoring of animal welfare throughout the slaughterhouse. It welcomes the EU Commission's proposals to formalise this role in legislation and urges government to see this maintained in the negotiations on the new Slaughter Regulation.