

EU Directive on the welfare of meat chickens

Each year over 5 billion meat chickens are reared in the EU (800 million per year of them in the UK); this makes them by far the most numerous of all farmed species. Until recently they remained largely unprotected by the law on-farm.

On 7 May 2007, however, the EU Agriculture Council agreed the Broilers Directive, i.e. a Council Directive laying down minimum rules for the protection of chickens kept for meat production (commonly known as broiler chickens).

The Directive comes into force in 2010. It for the first time applies detailed legislative provisions to the welfare of broilers on-farm. (Broilers are already covered during transport and slaughter by the Transport Regulation¹ and the Slaughter Directive² respectively).

The Broilers Directive is very disappointing - it gives the green light to the continuation of the industrial farming of broilers. However, it mandates a number of future reports (see below) which will give opportunities to press for the Directive to be strengthened.

The Directive's principal flaws

It is widely recognised that two core problems bedevil the intensive broiler industry: serious overcrowding and the use of fast-growing breeds.

Overcrowding

Intensively reared broilers are kept in huge windowless sheds that are so overcrowded that, as the birds grow bigger, one can barely see the floor so thickly is it 'carpeted' with chickens. Up to 50,000 chickens may be crammed into one of these sheds. The birds never see daylight or enjoy fresh air.

¹ Council Regulation (EC) No 1/2005 of 22 December 2004 on the protection of animals during transport and related operations. Official Journal L 3, 5.1.2005, p 001-0044.

² Council Directive 93/119/EC of 22 December 1993 on the protection of animals at the time of slaughter or killing. Official Journal L340, 31.12.1993, p 0021-0034.

The Directive sets a maximum stocking density of 33kg/m². The average slaughter weight of broilers is around 2.2kg so a stocking density of 33kg/m² equates to around 15 chickens/m². The Directive goes on to provide that farmers may stock at the higher maximum of 39kg/m² (around 18 chickens/m²) provided that they observe certain very modest welfare requirements. One helpful requirement for farmers who stock at the upper maximum density is that ammonia levels must not exceed 20 ppm (parts per million).

Farmers who keep mortality below around 4% qualify for a 'reward' - they are allowed to add an extra 3kg/ m² to the upper maximum stocking density.

The upper maximum stocking density of 39kg/m² (as well as the 'reward' maximum density of 42kg/m²) is far too high and represents severe overcrowding.

The EU Scientific Committee on Animal Health and Animal Welfare stressed that the maximum density “must be 25 kg/m² or lower for major welfare problems to be largely avoided”.³ They added that “above 30 kg/m², even with very good environmental control systems, there is a steep rise in the frequency of serious problems”.

A range of scientific studies show that higher densities lead to (i) an increased incidence of leg problems, (ii) a higher level of infectious agents, (iii) wet and dirty litter which leads to a greater incidence of foot pad dermatitis, hock burns and breast blisters, (iv) a reduction in activity which can increase leg problems and (v) increased disturbance of birds' ability to rest.

Use of fast-growing breeds

Modern broilers have been pushed (through selective breeding and rich diets) to reach their slaughter weight in about 41 days, which is around twice as fast as 35 years ago. The legs fail to keep pace with the rapidly growing body and often buckle under the strain of supporting it. As a result each year in the EU tens of millions of broilers suffer from painful, sometimes crippling leg disorders. The heart and lungs too cannot keep pace with the overgrown body and millions of EU broilers succumb to heart failure each year.

³ Report of the Scientific Committee on Animal Health and Animal Welfare of 21 March 2000 on the welfare of chickens kept for meat production (broilers).

The proposed Directive side-steps these problems and merely requires the Commission to submit a report on these issues by the end of 2010. There is, however, no need to delay taking action on leg and heart disorders as there is already a very substantial body of scientific research that establishes that these problems primarily stem from the use of fast-growing breeds.⁴ The Directive's requirement for a report is simply a delaying tactic which leaves millions of broilers to suffer unnecessarily.

Future reports

The Directive requires a number of future reports:

- The Commission must produce a report on labelling by the end of 2009. Mandatory labelling as to farming method would be extremely helpful in enabling consumers to make informed choices.
- The Commission must produce a report on genetics (fast growth rates) by the end of 2010
- The Commission must produce a report concerning the application of the Directive and its influence on the welfare of chickens, as well as the development of welfare indicators, by 30 June 2012.

These reports will provide opportunities to press for the Directive's provisions to be strengthened,

The Protocol on Protection and Welfare of Animals that was annexed by the Treaty of Amsterdam⁵ to the EC Treaty requires the Community and the Member States, in formulating and implementing the Community's policies on agriculture, to "pay full regard to the welfare requirements of animals" (emphasis added). The new Directive signally fails to pay full regard to the welfare requirements of broilers; instead it simply provides a veneer of legal respectability to an inhumane farming system.

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⁴ As note 3; and Kestin S.C., Gordon S., Su G. and Sørensen P., 2001. Relationships in broiler chickens between lameness, liveweight, growth rate and age. *Veterinary Record* **148**: 195-197.

⁵ Treaty of Amsterdam amending the Treaty on European Union, the Treaties establishing the European Communities and certain related acts. *Official Journal* C340, 10.11.1997 p. 0110.

