

NEWS RELEASE



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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

UK GOVERNMENT TURNS ITS BACK ON CHICKENS

The UK Government is set to lower chicken welfare standards despite soaring sales of higher welfare, major shifts in retailer policies and high-profile chicken campaigning.

Despite sales of higher welfare chicken increasing by 42 per cent from 2007 to 2008, the Department for Environment Food and Rural Affairs (DEFRA) are planning to lower UK standards and effectively giving the green light to further intensification of chicken farming warns Compassion in World Farming.

Yesterday (26 January) DEFRA released new proposed regulations that conforms to the EU Directive. DEFRA is planning to abandon its previous recommendation that the maximum stocking density for chickens should be 34 kilograms per square metre and instead increase the maximum permitted density to up to 42 kilograms per square metre, which is equivalent to keeping 19 birds per square metre.

Peter Stevenson, Chief Policy Advisor at Compassion in World Farming, comments: "This is a huge step backward. This proposal is dangerous in that it makes consumers think that the law protects chickens but in fact it will simply give a veneer of legislative respectability to factory farming."

"We were immensely disappointed with the EU Directive when it was first agreed in 2007, now the UK is planning to lower its standards to come into line with the Directive, giving a green light to the continuation of intensive poultry production. Cramming 19 chickens into a square metre is unacceptable."

“Many major retailers are waking up to pressure from consumers and campaigns by celebrity chefs Hugh Fearnley-Whittingstall and Jamie Oliver and committing to improving chicken welfare, so why is the government so out of touch with public perception?”

Research by the European Union’s Scientific Committee on Animal Health and Animal Welfare (SCAHAW) shows that stocking density should be no higher than 25 kilograms per square metre (around 12 birds per square metre) in order to avoid major welfare problems. Above 30 kilograms per square metre (around 13 birds per square metre) there is a ‘steep rise in the frequency of serious problems’.

END

Notes to the editor

▪ The Directive and animal welfare

The lower maximum stocking density agreed is 33 kilogram per square metre. Farmers who achieve certain modest welfare standards are permitted to stock to an upper maximum stocking density of 39 kilogram per square metre. For farmers who stock at the upper maximum density, ammonia levels must not exceed 20 parts per million

- Farmers who keep mortality below around 3 per cent according to age at slaughter qualify for a 'reward' - they are allowed to add an extra 3 kilogram per square metre to the upper maximum stocking density.
- The directive, which will come into force in 2010, also fails to tackle fast growth rates. Scientific research shows that these unnatural fast growth rates cause serious problems, according to a large-scale study at Bristol University, 27 per cent of UK chickens suffer from lameness.

Consumer trends

- The announcement from DEFRA comes at a time when consumers are increasingly opting for higher welfare chicken, as Compassion in World Farming’s recent report with TNS data showed. Between 2007 and 2008 free-range chicken sales alone have grown by 35 per cent, with growth of 42 per cent for higher welfare indoor-produced chicken meat. DEFRA is going in the opposite direction, allowing farmers to rear poultry in inhumane conditions where chickens suffer from lameness, sudden death syndrome, lung and heart difficulties.
- Compassion in World Farming’s full report on sales of higher welfare chicken is available upon request.

Last chance to vote for Hugh Fearnley-Whittingstall’s Chicken Out “honest label” search

- Visit www.chickenout.tv to vote for the most misleading chicken label currently used by UK retailers. Voting will close on 1 February.

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