

Poultry Slaughter: The Need for Legislation



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Poultry represent the largest number of animals slaughtered for food in the United States. Nine of the ten billion animals slaughtered in US facilities each year are birds - chickens, turkeys, ducks, and others. Yet poultry are excluded from humane slaughter protection. The 1958 federal Humane Methods of Slaughter Act does not cover birds. At the time, those working to enact some form of humane slaughter legislation omitted poultry, with the understanding that birds would subsequently be brought under the coverage accorded to mammals. The time has come to fulfill this goal.

"Slaughter is different from processing in that the raw material is alive, has a central nervous system, can express emotional states, and has biological components like humans." - Dr. Janice Swanson, American Meat Institute Foundation's Annual Animal Handling and Stunning Conference, February 21-22, 2002

"Do you think from your perception that the birds have a sense of what is going to happen to them?"

"Yes. They try everything in their power to get away from the [killing] machine and to get away from you. Even the ones that are stunned into immobility. If these people are trying to say, because this chicken is stunned, it doesn't know what's going to happen or doesn't know what's going on, they are lying. I stood on the kill floor and watched. They will look at you, they'll open up their mouths; they try to squawk. They'll do all that, they'll get as mobile as they can, trying to get away. They have been stunned, so their muscles don't work, but their eyes do and you can tell by them looking at you, they're scared to death." - Virgil Butler, former Tyson slaughterhouse worker, Press Conference, Little Rock, Arkansas, February 19, 2003

Catching & Transport of Chickens and Other Birds Slaughtered for Meat

At the poultry slaughter plant each day thousands of birds are crammed inside crates stacked on trucks waiting to be killed. Truckload after truckload pulls into the holding dock where huge fans rotate to reduce the number of birds who will die of heat prostration while waiting to enter the slaughterhouse. In winter many birds freeze to death waiting to be killed. A forklift picks the top-most pallet of crates off each flatbed truck, and the birds disappear into the darkness.

They come out of the darkness. "Live haul involves hand catching the birds, mostly at night, in a darkened dust-laden atmosphere," a USDA manual explains (1). Men move into the barns clapping their hands and shouting to make room for a forklift with a 5-foot cabinet of cages. When a forklift drops a box of cages, the men corner a group of chickens, grabbing in each hand one leg each of four to five terrified birds who are hurled like footballs and stuffed in the cages like trash in a can. In the 1990s, chicken-catching machines resembling giant street sweepers were also introduced. These 6-ton machines move through the chickens, scooping up 7,000 birds an hour with rubber finger-like projections that place them on a conveyer belt. The belt carries the birds into the machine where they are placed in crates automatically. When a crate is full, a forklift loads it onto the truck. When the truck is filled with the crated birds, they are driven to the slaughterhouse.



Karen Davis



Joey Gardney - Associated Press

At the Slaughterhouse

Shackling

At the slaughterhouse, the birds sit in the trucks without food or water for 1 to 9 hours or more waiting to be killed. Inside the plant, in the "live-hang" area, they are violently jammed into a movable metal rack that clamps them upside down by their feet. Suspending these heavy birds, most of whom are already crippled, upside down by their feet, puts a painful strain on their legs and hips. Worse, meat industry specialist Dr. Temple Grandin reports "seeing a lot of one-legged shackling" of birds (2).



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Electrical Immobilization

The birds' heads and upper bodies are then dragged through a splashing water trough called a "stunner." This water, which is cold and salted to conduct electricity, does not stun the birds. Its purpose is to immobilize them to keep them from thrashing and to paralyze the muscles of their feather follicles so their feathers will pop out easily, as well as to induce certain "meat" characteristics in their breast muscle tissue (3). For these reasons, at least 24 million chickens, turkeys, and ducks are intentionally tortured every day with volts of electricity in federally-inspected slaughterhouses, and further tortured when the machinery breaks down. A former Tyson chicken slaughterhouse worker said that when a line broke down at the plant where he worked, birds would be left hanging upside down in the stunner to drown and that he personally saw them "hang in that position for hours" (4).



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Neck-Cutting

After being dragged through the "stun" bath, the paralyzed conscious birds have their necks partially sliced by a rotating machine blade and/or a manual neck cutter. Although both carotid arteries must be quickly severed to ensure a rapid death, these arteries, which carry the oxygenated blood responsible for consciousness to the brain, and which are deeply embedded in the bird's neck, are often missed. So haphazard is neck-cutting that *The Poultry Tribune* refers to "hopefully hitting the jugular vein" of the birds at slaughter (5).



Caroll McCormick

Bleed-Out Tunnel and Scald Tank

Still alive - the industry intentionally keeps the birds

alive during the slaughter process so their hearts will continue to pump blood -- they then hang upside down for 90 seconds in a bleedout tunnel where they're supposed to die from blood loss, but millions of birds do not die, while an unspecified number of birds drown in pools of blood when the conveyor belt dips too close to the floor. Dead or alive, the birds are then dropped into tanks of semi-scalding water. In 1993, of 7 billion birds slaughtered in U.S. facilities, over 3 million birds were plunged into the scald tanks alive (6). According to a former slaughterhouse worker, when chickens are scalded alive, they "flop, scream, kick, and their eyeballs pop out of their heads. They often come out of the other end with broken bones and disfigured and missing body parts because they've struggled so much in the tank" (4).

Ritual and Live Market Slaughter

Technically, ritual slaughter refers to "a method of slaughter whereby the animal suffers loss of consciousness by anemia of the brain caused by the simultaneous and instantaneous severance of the carotid arteries with a sharp instrument" (7). In practice, "ritual slaughter" is likely to involve severing the windpipe and jugular vein of unstunned birds and ramming the birds into bleeding cones after their throats are cut (8). At Empire Kosher, birds packed in crates on a moving belt are grabbed by one worker, held up by another to the slaughterer's blade, then hung upside down by another worker on a moving line of hooks. Blood spurts violently to the floor and the chickens thrash desperately on the hooks (9).

Killing Unwanted Birds

Killing Unwanted "Meat-Type" Birds

In 2002, workers at a Puerto Rican slaughter plant were videotaped beating to death 76,000 chickens with sticks, metal tubes and baseball bats because, according to a plant executive, "they did not come up to the high standards of quality which we demand" (10). In 1999, the manager of a turkey farm in Minnesota was videotaped bludgeoning sick, lame, and injured turkeys with a metal pipe and pliers and throwing the still living birds in piles as well as wringing their necks (11). Cervical dislocation, or "neck-wringing," is a standard farming practice for getting rid of unwanted birds, who are typically thrown with their broken necks on "dead piles" where they slowly and painfully suffocate.



Mercy for Animals

Killing Unwanted "Egg-Laying" Hens

"When I visited a large egg layer operation and saw old hens that had reached the end of their productive life, I WAS HORRIFIED. Egg layers bred for maximum egg production . . . were nervous wrecks that had beaten off half their feathers by constant flapping against the cage." - Dr. Temple Grandin, Paper presented at the National Institute of Animal Agriculture, April 4, 2001.

Because "spent" hens have no market value, few slaughter plants will take them. As a result, most of these birds are suffocated to death in dumpsters (12), then trucked to rendering facilities, or buried alive in landfills. According to Tom Hughes of the Canadian Farm Animal Trust, "The simplest method of disposal is to pack the

birds, alive, into containers, and bulldoze them into the ground." Another method is "to pack the birds into a closed truck and connect the exhaust to the body of the truck" (13). In 2003, workers at a battery-hen complex in California said that when their arms got tired from breaking the necks of 30,000 unwanted hens, they threw the live hens into wood chipping machinery, in which a piece of wood is "fed into a chipper's funnel-shaped opening, and blades on a rapidly spinning disk or drum cut it into small pieces" (14).



Mercy for Animals

Killing Unwanted Chicks

Along with defective and slow-hatching female chicks, the U.S. egg industry trashes 250 million male chicks as soon as they hatch because the males don't lay eggs. Instead of being sheltered by a mother's wings, the newborns are ground up alive or thrown into trashcans where they slowly suffocate on top of one another, peeping pitifully as a human foot stomps them down to make room for more chicks. Some hatcheries gas the chicks with carbon dioxide (CO₂). Ruth Harrison, the author of *Animal Machines* (1964), said she stopped supporting CO₂ gassing of chicks after subjecting herself to inhalation of various gas concentrations. She said, "In my opinion, it is no better than the old practice of filling up a dustbin with them and letting them suffocate" (15).

"Humane" Slaughter Laws for Poultry

There are no federal laws governing the raising, transport, or slaughter of poultry in the United States. Although birds represent 99 percent of animals slaughtered for food in the U.S., they are excluded from the federal Humane Methods of Slaughter Act (7). Canada has an unenforceable *Recommended Code of Practice*, and the U.K. leaves enforcement of its welfare laws to the Meat Hygiene Service and to an unenforceable *Ministry of Agricultural Code of Practice*. In the European Union (EU), a 1997 draft proposal by the European Commission to strengthen an EU Directive to set legally binding stunning standards for birds and mammals "seems to have disappeared" (16).

Remedies

Federal Legislation

Though no truly humane system of slaughter can be devised, conditions in the U.S. could be improved by redefining "livestock" in the federal Humane Methods of Slaughter Act (7) to include poultry, or by amending the 1957 Poultry Products Inspection Act (21 U.S. Code of Federal Regulations) to include a humane slaughter provision for poultry. The latter approach was tried in three bills introduced by Congressman Andrew Jacobs (Indiana) in the U.S. House of Representatives in the 1990s: H.R. 4124 (1992); H.R. 649 (1993); and H.R. 264 (1995). Despite a vigorous lobby by United Poultry Concerns, all of these bills died in the House Agricultural Livestock Subcommittee to which they were referred, and efforts to get a Senate companion bill failed. It's time to try again.

State Anti-Cruelty Laws

In some U.S. states, the worst poultry slaughter abuses might be prosecuted under the state anti-cruelty laws, a prospect that should be investigated. States that already have humane slaughter laws should adopt amendments to include poultry, as was done in California in 1991 (17). That law excludes "spent" hens and small "game" birds, a loophole that needs to be closed. (Products sold within a state are regulated by state laws. Interstate commerce is regulated by the federal government.)

Gas Stun-Killing of Birds

"Because gas-stunned birds regain consciousness rapidly, they must be killed, rather than stunned, by the gas."
Peter Stevenson, *Animal Welfare Problems in UK Slaughterhouses*. Compassion In World Farming, July 2001

An increasing number of welfarists are calling for the replacement of paralytic electric shock equipment with gas-based technology that will kill the birds in the transport crates prior to shackling, thus sparing them the pain and stress of live shackling, electrical paralysis, neck cutting, and for millions of birds each year, being scalded alive. Based on the evidence, the U.K. approved, in 1995, two gas mixtures with relatively high percentages of argon (60% and 90%), an inert gas that is heavier than air and said to be fairly easy to contain. In 2001, the British government amended the U.K.'s Welfare of Animals (Slaughter or Killing) Regulations 1995 to allow higher concentrations of argon and/or nitrogen and lower concentrations of CO₂ to be voluntarily used in the gas stunning of poultry (18).

In 1997, poultry welfare specialist Dr. Ian Duncan of the University of Guelph in Ontario, Canada, wrote that his observation of chickens entering a tunnel containing a mixture of 30% CO₂, 60% argon, 8% nitrogen, and 2% oxygen convinced him that this is "the most stress-free, humane method of killing poultry ever developed" (19). He said the birds were quiet, they remained in the transport crates until dead, and the procedure was "fast, painless and efficient," with no risk of recovery from unconsciousness.

Poultry Slaughtered Under Federal Inspection in the United States in 2001

Sources:

USDA-National Agricultural Statistics Service (NASS) Agricultural Statistics 2003

<http://www.usda.gov/nass/pubs/agstats.htm>

United States: 8.9 billion birds:

8.5 billion chickens, 269 million turkeys, 26 million ducks, 14 million pounds of "miscellaneous" birds: ostriches, emus, geese, pigeons, quails, and pheasants.

Chickens Slaughtered World Wide

World wide over 43 billion chickens are slaughtered for meat. Source: Compassion in World Farming 2003.



Carol McCormick

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Further Reading

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2. <http://www.UPC-online.org/slaughter/>
3. Cem Akin, The Serious Welfare Problems of Electrical Stunning for Poultry and the Case for Gas Killing as Means for More Humane Slaughter: <http://www.kfccruelty.com/cemgaskillmemo.html>

United Poultry Concerns is a nonprofit organization that promotes the compassionate and respectful treatment of domestic fowl. Please join us and support our work.

Go to: <http://www.upc-online.org/email>

Or contact:

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www.UPC-online.org.



Show Congress You Care About These Birds and Urge Your Members to Join You

The purpose of a humane slaughter law is to codify obligations already accepted by society. The absence of a law to protect poultry conveys the false notion to the public, and to those who work directly with poultry, that these birds do not suffer, or that their suffering does not matter, and that humans have no merciful obligation to birds. Please contact your Members of Congress (your two Senators and your House Representative) and urge them to sponsor and support humane slaughter legislation that covers poultry the same as mammals. The most effective letter is a personal one. It should be concise, informed, and polite.

The Honorable _____
United States Senate
Washington, DC 20510
Dear Senator _____

The Honorable _____
United States House of Representatives
Washington, DC 20515
Dear Representative _____

To learn your Members of Congress call the Capital Switchboard: 202-224-3121. Or visit www.senate.gov or www.house.gov.



*"Don't be afraid.
The pain won't last long.
Soon it will be over.
Don't be afraid.
The pain will end quickly.
Your friends will be near you.*

*"Go on-it's time.
You have no choice.
Just close your eyes-don't look at the blood.
Soon it will be over.
Soon you will be
Right here in heaven.
Dead like me."*

Linda Howard

--Laurie Cloud