

# **Questions and answers on the welfare of chickens kept for meat production (broilers)**

## **Why has the Commission brought forward this proposal?**

The farming of chickens for meat production is a very important sector within the EU, with over 5 billion chickens slaughtered per year, representing more than any other farmed species. Scientific data indicates that due to the intensive farming conditions of this sector, there are significant challenges for the health and welfare of these animals. This is why various stakeholders such as farming organisations, animal protection groups, consumers and governments have been calling for improved animal welfare rules in this area.

## **Are there any current rules for the protection of these animals?**

There are currently no specific rules at EU-level, only general rules on the protection of farm animals apply (Directive 98/58/EC). However, some countries such as Sweden and Denmark have already introduced national legislation in this area. In addition, various codes of practice and quality assurance schemes developed by governments and stakeholders already include animal welfare rules for the protection of broilers.

## **What are the main welfare problems experienced by these birds?**

Skeletal problems can result in leg weakness, impaired walking ability, bone weakness and fractures. Skin diseases such as contact dermatitis related to poor bedding (litter) quality and respiratory problems due to poor air quality can also develop. Heat stress and sudden death syndromes also occur, and the restricted space available to chickens can result in an inability to perform normal behaviours.

## **What are the advantages offered by the Commission proposal?**

The Commission has made a proposal for a Council Directive laying down minimum rules for the protection of chickens kept for meat production. Existing codes of practice and rules differ between countries and common EU-wide minimum rules will offer a more level playing field for producers and reduce distortions of trade and competition. The Commission's proposal aims at introducing important animal welfare improvements and enhanced monitoring on farms and at slaughterhouses so that appropriate corrective action can be taken if animal welfare problems occur.

## **What measures are envisaged to improve the welfare of the birds on the farm?**

Various environmental parameters such as lighting, temperature requirements, air quality and litter (bedding) availability are specified in the Commission's proposal. More stringent requirements are outlined for more intensive farms where birds are kept at a higher stocking density (up to 38 kg liveweight per m<sup>2</sup>, as opposed to less intensive systems operating at a stocking density of up to 30 kg liveweight per m<sup>2</sup>). The importance of training for farmers and those working on farms is also emphasised. This also applies to those who catch the birds before their transport to the slaughterhouse, since many injuries and bone fractures may result at this time if birds are not carefully handled.

## **How can consumers be better informed of the welfare conditions under which broilers are farmed?**

Various studies have demonstrated consumers' interest in animal welfare but that the absence of clear labelling hinders their ability to make informed purchasing decisions. As a means of ensuring that consumers are well informed and as an incentive for producers to improve the welfare conditions of broilers, the Commission is considering possible mandatory labelling regimes for chicken meat indicating that they were produced in compliance with animal welfare standards. The proposed Directive contains a commitment for the Commission to further investigate how this could be done in practice and report to the Council and European Parliament on this issue.

## **Why does the proposal not address the issue of broiler breeder birds (the parent stock of commercial flocks)?**

Parent flocks are housed under very different conditions to birds kept for meat production (e.g. cages versus floor-based barn systems). The welfare problems can also be quite distinct. For example, the food offered to breeder birds is restricted in order to limit their growth rate, while commercial flocks might rather suffer from the inverse problem of overfeeding and rapid growth resulting in severe animal health and welfare problems including metabolic disorders. Within the proposal the Commission has specified the intention to report separately to the Council and European Parliament on this issue and the influence of genetic parameters on animal welfare. This report will be based on the collection of further data and scientific evidence and having undertaken the necessary consultations with stakeholder groups etc.