Animal Welfare for Broiler Chickens

Consumers want to be sure that all animals being raised for food are treated with respect and are properly cared for during their lives. Public criticism of Broiler Chicken industry practices comes largely from people who are opposed to using animals for food under any circumstances. In general this philosophy is not accepted by the vast majority of Americans.

The people and companies involved in raising chickens for food share the public’s concern. They recognize that they have an ethical obligation to make sure that the animals on their farms are well cared for. They also have strong economic incentives to do so.

Carefully formulated feed, access to a plentiful supply of clean water, adequate room to grow, professional veterinary attention, and proper handling are all important factors in the management of broiler chickens, as well as the production of high-quality food products. To assist the people and the companies who produce and process chickens for food, the National Chicken Council developed the NCC Animal Welfare Guidelines and Audit Checklist which have been widely adopted within the chicken industry.

Housing

Broilers (young meat chickens) are not raised in cages. They are raised in large, open structures known as growout houses.

- These houses are well-equipped with mechanical systems to deliver feed and water to the birds and have environmental systems to provide a comfortable and protective environment, including ventilation systems and heaters that function as needed.
- The floor of the house is covered with bedding material consisting of organic matter such as wood chips, rice hulls, or peanut shells. Dry bedding helps maintain flock health, so most growout houses have enclosed watering systems rather than open troughs to reduce spillage and help keep the litter dry.

Housing Ventilation

Most chicken growout houses are located in the South, in the so-called “Broiler Belt” stretching from Delaware to Texas. While the South has the advantage of mild winters, it is also subject to periods of very hot weather in the summer. The solution has been the installation of large fans in conjunction with tunnel ventilation that keeps air moving throughout the house.

- Many growout houses are also equipped with evaporative cooling pads or other system that put moisture into the air. This causes a cooling of the air passing over the birds. These innovations have greatly reduced hot-weather mortality.
Space

Traditionally, a flock of broilers consist of about 20,000 birds in a growout house that measures 400 feet long and 40 feet wide, thus providing an area of about 16,000 square feet, or eight-tenths of a square foot per bird. As the birds age, they grow into this space.

- The Council for Agricultural Science and Technology (CAST) states that the minimum space is one-half square foot per bird, so industry practice is well in excess of this space requirement.

Feed

Chicken feed consists primarily of corn and soybean meal with the addition of essential vitamins and minerals. No hormones or steroids are allowed in raising chickens.

Water

Water is usually drawn from a well on the farm or from a municipal water supply and is pumped into the house to be available to the chickens as desired.

Veterinary Attention

Every broiler company employs or contracts with professional veterinarians to care for the health needs of the birds.

- The farmers and company service personnel monitor the birds for any health problems and promptly inform the company veterinary staff so that appropriate action can be taken.
- Several medications are approved by the FDA to treat health problems in broiler chickens. A withdrawal period is provided before the birds are sent to the processing plant to make sure any medication residue is removed from the birds’ systems.

Proper Handling

Company personnel are required to handle the birds in an appropriate manner during pickup and arrival at the processing plant.

- Birds that display bruises are not allowed to have those bruised parts sold for human food.
Humane Slaughter

After arrival at the plant, birds are anesthetized with a mild electric current (birds and other animals are stunned by electric current that would be barely noticed by a human) and then humanely slaughtered. The stunning renders the birds insensitive to pain.

- In a typical system, the anesthetized birds are passed by a device that severs the carotid and/or jugular arteries. This whole process takes place in seconds.

Breeding

There is no “genetic engineering” or “genetic modification” in the chicken industry.

- Today’s broiler chicken is a combination of several breeds. Desirable characteristics include white feathers (to give the skin a clear appearance) and abundant breast meat. Breeding is done in the traditional manner.

Inoculation

Birds are subject to a variety of diseases, just as humans are. Just like humans, they receive inoculations against the diseases for which vaccines are available.

- Most broiler companies now use a machine which injects the vaccines into the egg during the incubation period. The chicken embryo absorbs the vaccine during its final three days of growth in the egg.
- After the chicks are hatched, they pass through another machine which sprays them with a light mist containing another inoculation against other diseases.

(Source: The National Chicken Council [http://www.nationalchickencouncil.org/industry-issues/animal-welfare-for-broiler-chickens/])