

A VISION FOR THE FUTURE OF BROILER FARMING

Five scientists paint their picture



WHAT SHOULD “IDEAL” BROILER REARING SYSTEMS LOOK LIKE IN 10-20 YEARS, IF ALL WELFARE REQUIREMENTS OF THE ANIMALS ARE TAKEN INTO ACCOUNT?

We asked five international experts.
Here are their answers.



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1

BROILER REARING SHOULD BE CENTRED ON THE WELFARE OF THE BIRDS

First of all, we would like to call on policy-makers to encourage rearing systems where bird welfare is recognised as a goal in itself. The prerequisite is adopting higher-welfare, slower-growing breeds, so as to resolve the health issues associated with selection for fast growth. It also implies providing (more natural) environments to which the birds are adapted and a variety of stimuli, which can contribute to give these animals “good lives”.

2

CHICKEN REARING SYSTEMS SHOULD PROMOTE POSITIVE EMOTIONS

Future systems should meet and exceed the requirements of the Five Freedoms. In particular, rearing systems for chickens should promote positive emotions for all animals and at all stages of production (parent birds, hatcheries and broiler chickens). This can be achieved in a number of ways, whose common denominators are choice, variety and interest, built on a sound perception of safety for the birds. The birds should enjoy variety of different stimuli, such as natural light, access to protected outdoor runs, clean and well-maintained litter, fresh air, and ample opportunities to show a range of behaviours including dust-bathing, seeking shelter, exploring, perching and foraging and a choice of different food items, different micro-climates and light intensity.

Additionally, chickens should be offered enjoyable learning experiences and be able to establish positive social interactions.

Negative stimuli or experiences (e.g. loud noises, rough handling, high stocking densities, chronic feed restriction) should be avoided.

“Chickens are individuals – they should be given opportunities to express their own preferences.”

Christine Nicol
Royal Veterinary College, UK

3

CONTINUOUS MEASURING OF ANIMAL WELFARE OUTCOMES IS NECESSARY FOR CONTINUOUS IMPROVEMENT

Each system should be evaluated and monitored to ensure that it does not only provide good welfare design, but that it also delivers desirable animal welfare outcomes, such as good leg health, good levels of activity, cleanliness of the plumage, positive social interactions, etc. Once chosen, such welfare outcomes should regularly be measured in all flocks, preferably in an automated way, and should clearly show that any new/alternative chicken rearing system performs substantially better than existing systems.

4

PROMOTING POSITIVE HUMAN-ANIMAL INTERACTIONS

Where this does not already exist, farmers and other stockpersons should establish a positive human-animal relationship, which translates into positive interactions and behaviours towards the chickens at all stages of production, including catching, transport and slaughter. Besides improving animal welfare, we believe this will contribute to an improved public perception of broiler chicken production as well as an improved sense of pride and self-esteem on the part of farmers and other actors in the supply chain.

“ Future broiler systems should promote positive emotions, which requires effective environmental enrichment.”

Ingrid de Jong

Wageningen University & Research, NL

“ The most distressing and potentially painful events in broilers’ lives are catching, transportation and slaughter. Effort towards improving those stages are invaluable for broiler chicken welfare.”

Leonie Jacobs

Virginia Tech University, USA



5

A PAINLESS FINAL JOURNEY

The final stage of the life of broiler chickens should be painless, and without fear or injury. The birds should no longer be kept without feed for prolonged periods of time before being caught for slaughter. Thinning should be avoided. **Catching should be gentle** (no inversion of live birds during catching). **Stunning/killing methods should be painless:** conscious birds should never be inverted in shackles but should be stunned while crated with methods that rapidly and painlessly induce unconsciousness or death. **Welfare-friendly on-farm slaughter systems should become more widely available** as they avoid transportation and prolonged time in crates.

“Shackling conscious birds before stunning and slaughter compromises animal welfare and can be prevented.”

Marien Gerritzen
Wageningen University & Research, NL

“Animal welfare matters to EU citizens and is an important component of sustainability. The development of future broiler systems should be underpinned by our increasing scientific understanding of the wants and needs of these birds.”

Niamh O’Connell
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