

Urgent Need to Improve Broiler Chicken Welfare in the EU



Poor Animal Welfare

With a yearly production of **6.5 billion broiler chickens**, the EU accounts for roughly 10% of poultry meat production in the world. First developed after World War II to supply the market with large amounts of cheap meat, industrial broiler chicken production is now the predominant way of producing poultry meat in the EU.

Today, broiler chickens reach their final slaughter weight (1.8 - 2.5kg) in as little as 40 days. Broiler chickens grow at such a rapid pace and develop such an unnatural volume of muscle and fat that they can no longer support their own weight. Due to this abnormally fast growth rate, broiler chickens suffer poor welfare over the course of their short lives: many suffer from painful lameness and an array of heart and respiratory conditions. Broiler chickens are still administered high levels of antibiotics to mitigate the spread of parasitic and infectious diseases, which proliferate due to overcrowding and wet litter. The use of antibiotics in poultry farming has been identified as a source of antimicrobial resistance, putting public health at risk.

Broiler chickens are typically reared in barns without outdoor access that can hold up to tens of thousands of birds. These barns often lack natural light and any type of enrichment materials, such as perches or straw bales, depriving chickens of the ability to perform natural behaviours like perching, dustbathing or scratching.

Shortcomings of EU Legislation

The minimum requirements on the welfare of broiler chickens are set down in **Council Directive 2007/43/EC (Broiler Directive)**. However, this Directive has three major limitations. First, breeding farms and hatcheries are outside of its scope, thus excluding two important segments of industrial poultry production and categories of animals particularly at risk of suffering from degraded welfare: female breeders and baby chicks. Secondly, a series of exemptions allow producers to keep an overwhelming 66% of broiler chickens at much higher stocking densities than the maximum allowed in the Directive. Finally, the Directive does not regulate common industry practices that are detrimental to animal welfare, such as the selective breeding for fast growth, the lack of enrichment materials and natural light in the barns, and the absence of outdoor access. In fact, the requirements of the Broiler Directive are so low that the Commission itself, in a 2018 report, found that *“production systems [were] basically the same as before the Directive entered into force,”*¹ thus indicating that the Directive only had a limited effect on improving the welfare of chickens.



¹ European Commission, Report from the Commission to the European Parliament and the Council on the Application of Directive 2007/43/EC and its Influence on the Welfare of Chickens Kept for Meat Production, as well as the development of Welfare Indicators, p. 8, April 2018.