DISCUSSION

A CRITIQUE OF THE PROPOSED EU ANIMAL WELFARE DIRECTIVE FROM A HUNGARIAN POINT OF VIEW

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SUMMARY FINDINGS, CONCLUSIONS, RECOMMENDATIONS

After a long wait the European Union has published a draft Directive (2005/0099) setting out minimum legal standards for the protection of chickens reared for meat. If adopted it will establish some common standards for the treatment of chickens across Europe, leading to regular inspections of flocks, and will set a platform on which future legislation could be built. The Directive arose from the advice given by the European Commission's own Scientific Committee on Animal Health and Animal Welfare (SCAHAW) in 2000, which expressed a number of concerns regarding the welfare of broilers reared in typical commercial farming systems.

The proposed Directive is extremely disappointing in that it fails to address the key health and welfare problems. In particular it fails to make any attempt to halt or restrict the use of fast-growing broilers despite the high levels of painful leg disorders and heart failure experienced by these birds. In the meantime a limit on maximum growth rates should be set. Lighting levels should be between 20 and 100 lux. A continuous period of darkness should be provided, which coincides with the natural night time and lasts a minimum of six hours. The proposed directive should permit broilers to be stocked at 30 kg/m^2.

The Commission also deals with air quality and climate, litter quality, training and environmental enrichment in the proposed directive, however in this study we only consider the three main issues.

The proposal was adopted by the Commission on 30th May 2005. To become law, it will need to be adopted by the Council of Ministers following various consultations, notably in the European Parliament and the Council Working Groups, which draw together government experts from EU Member States.

There are many NGO's, for instance the RSPCA, Eurogroup, CIWF, and the Fauna Egyesület in Hungary, who welcome the proposal as a first step towards improving the welfare of broiler chickens, but believe that far more could be done to deal with the specific welfare issues.

INTRODUCTION

After the transformation of its political system Hungary wanted to be part of European integration. This laid numerous duties upon our country. Pre-eminent among these was the harmonisation of laws, which touched upon the whole Hungarian legal system, including agricultural legislation. In consequence, nu-

merous problems needed solving in the rearing of poultry. The need to create an optimal environment for animals is justified not only by judicial and ethical considerations, but also by issues of economy. (6)

THE EU BROILER INDUSTRY

The EU broiler industry is part of the overall poultry meat sector, which includes meats from several different species of domestic bird, including chickens, turkeys, geese, ducks and guinea fowl. However, the dominant production type is chicken, with around 70% of EU production, followed by turkeys (20%) (Figure 2). (2)

Figure 1 shows the share of total agricultural production in each EU member state that is represented by the poultry sector for the EU15 and New Members States (NMS10). While poultry meat production takes place throughout the EU it is particularly significant in Poland, Hungary, the Czech Republic, France, the UK, and Italy. For the EU15, the top three producing countries account for some three fifths of output while the main five producing countries (France, UK, Italy, Spain, and Germany) account for over 80% of total production. For the NMS10, the top two producing countries (Poland, Hungary) account for almost 80% of total production (Figure 3). (2)

If the sector is examined at the individual member state level it is clear that poultry production represents a relatively small share of overall agricultural output at just under 4% for the EU-15 as a whole with only the UK, France and Portugal significantly exceeding this average. It should also be noted that in the NMS10 poultry production tends to be a more significant component of total agricultural production compared to the EU15 (2). Poultry meat production is particularly important in Hungary, for example, where it constitutes approximately 11% of total agricultural output.

THE NEW ANIMAL WELFARE PROPOSAL

In some key areas affecting welfare the proposed directive, in its current form, would fail to adequately protect birds. (3)

The structure of the proposal is as follows:

- *An Explanatory Memorandum,* which will not form part of the legislation when it becomes law.
- *Preamble.* This is effectively an introduction, which covers the legal context of the legislation, identifies the ‘problem’ to be solved and the scope of the legislation.
- *12 Articles.* This is where it starts getting interesting as these, together with the annexes, stipulate the actual rules that the legislation introduces.
- *5 Annexes.* These contain the specific technical details. (5)

GENETIC SELECTION

Chickens bred for their meat are genetically selected to grow quickly. From the time they hatch to their appearance as packaged meat in the supermarket can be less than 6 weeks. This rapid growth rate has contributed to increased incidences of heart failure and leg disorders in broiler chickens – in the UK alone it is estimated that about 100,000 birds die prematurely every day. (4)

What the proposed directive says

The Directive acknowledges the influence of genetic parameters on welfare. The EU Commission has committed it-

self to preparing a report on this issue, but it stated that this is likely to take more than five years to complete. (1)

What is required

As the SCAHAW report stated: "It is clear that the major welfare problems in broilers are those which can be regarded as side effects of the intense selection mainly for growth and feed conversion", but it is worrying that the issue of genetic selection has not been addressed within the proposals.

The Commission should commit itself to producing a scientific report within two years, accompanied by legislative proposals to address the genetic selection of broilers, with particular reference to its effects on lameness, ascites, sudden death syndrome and those impacts on behaviour that result in ammonium burns. (4)

National Farmers Union: "Levels of mortality in modern broilers are higher because of a higher incidence of heart and circulatory disorders in birds bred for a higher yield of breast meat. Further, modern broilers are more susceptible to infectious diseases…"

Welfare consequences of genetic selection for fast growth

The causes of lameness are complicated with interactions between genotype, nutrition and husbandry. However, much of the lameness seen in broiler chickens is a result of the selection for rapid juvenile growth rate, which results in abnormally high loads being placed on relatively immature bones and joints.

Scientific experiments have provided compelling evidence that leg problems cause broilers pain.

Lame birds are also reluctant to perform natural behaviours. Affected birds spend long periods lying, less time walking and reduce the number of visits to feeders compared to sound birds. Severely affected birds find it difficult to reach food and water and thus are at risk of dying of starvation and dehydration. (4)

STOCKING DENSITY

A European scientific report (SCAHAW) referred to stocking density as a major welfare issue in the debate on broiler welfare. It pointed out that high stocking densities may impair welfare both directly through movement restriction, and indirectly by causing poor litter and air quality. It concluded that when stocking densities exceed 30 kg/m^2, there is a steep rise in the frequency of serious welfare problems, regardless of the quality of management or the housing specifications. (4)

What the proposed directive says

Article 3 proposes a two-tier approach to stocking density. It lays down a maximum stocking density of 30 kg/m^2, but goes on to provide that Member States may allow a higher density of up to 38 kg/m^2 for producers who comply with the additional requirements laid down in Annex II (all producers must comply with the requirements of Annex I). In practice most producers will meet the relatively undemanding standards of Annex II and so be able to stock at 38 kg/m^2. (1)

What is required

This two-tier approach is based on the Swedish system. A single maximum density would be preferable (provided that it is low). In practice, however, the two-tier approach is probably a 'given' and the most effective strategy may well

be to argue that both its levels should be considerably reduced as compared with the Commission's proposal of 30 kg/m^2 and 38 kg/m^2. (4)

The stocking density limit should be no more than 30 kg/m^2.

The EU's own scientific committee says that anything over 30 kg/m^2 - approximately 15×2kg birds - leads to a steep rise in the frequency of serious welfare problems, such as leg disorders, that can cause pain and affect walking ability.

A stocking density of 38 kg/m^2 equates to only 526 cm^2 of space for a 2 kg bird- considerably less than a size of an A4 sheet of paper (623 cm^2), and even less than the space battery hens are provided with under the law (550 cm^2).

Welfare consequences of a high stocking density

- Reduced activity and lameness (The amount of walking and running decreases.)
- Skin diseases (As stocking density increases, so does the amount of heat, humidity, carbon-dioxide and ammonia produced per unit area. Scientific evidence shows skin diseases increase at higher densities.)
- Heat stress (High stocking densities are a major cause of heat stress problems, leading to suffering and death for many birds.)

LIGHTING

It is common practice to keep broilers at very low light intensities (at or below 10 lux). This discourages activity and maximises growth rate. (4)

What the proposed directive says

All buildings must have a lighting level of at least 20 lux. Light must follow a 24 hour rhythm and include periods of darkness lasting at least 8 hours in total - with at least one 4-hour uninterrupted period of darkness. (1)

What is required

The lighting level shall never be below 20 lux and the aim should be to set at a minimum of 100 lux.

The EU's own Scientific Committee concluded that brighter lighting is important to stimulate activity and is essential for survival in the first week of life. It further said that welfare problems arise from light intensities below 20 lux.

Birds should be provided with a continuous period of darkness, which coincides with the natural night time and which lasts a minimum of 6 hours. (3)

Welfare consequences of inadequate lighting

- Sleep disturbance

Normal patterns of sleep and daily cycles are disrupted by continuous light. Sleep is disturbed by companion birds walking to feeders, and this disruption is also likely to be greater at higher densities.

- Eye abnormalities

Research has shown that chickens housed under continuous and near-continuous light develop eye abnormalities including blindness and buphthalmos (eye enlargement) and protrusion. Other studies support these findings and show that these abnormalities start to form as early as 10 days old in continuous light.

- Stress

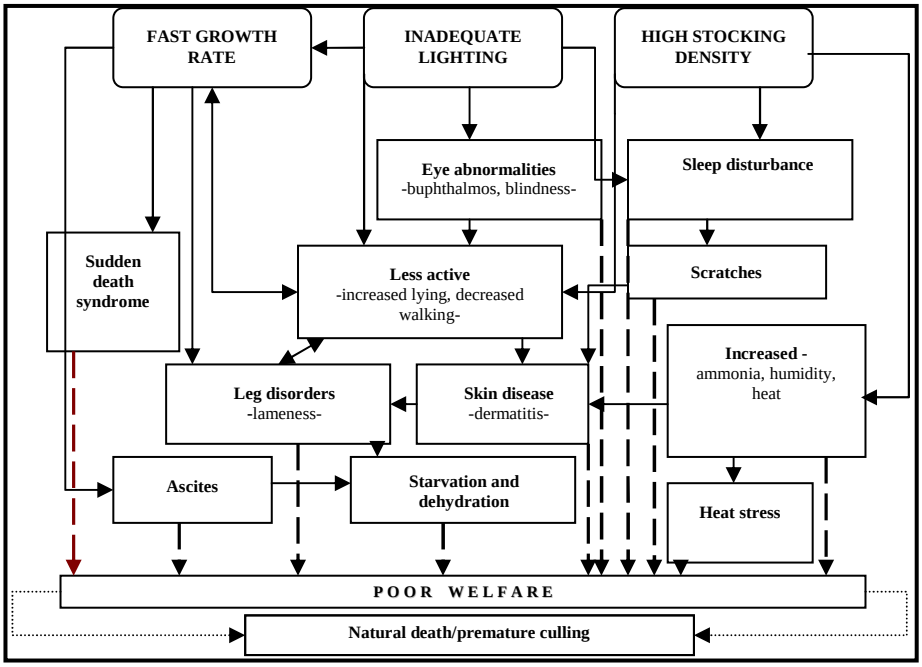
In chickens near-continuous and continuous light has been shown to be insufficient for sleep to occur and to reduce the responsiveness of the immune system.

- Leg disorders

Providing longer dark periods is believed to reduce the incidence of metabolic disorders such as ascites and sudden death syndrome. (4)

Figure 1

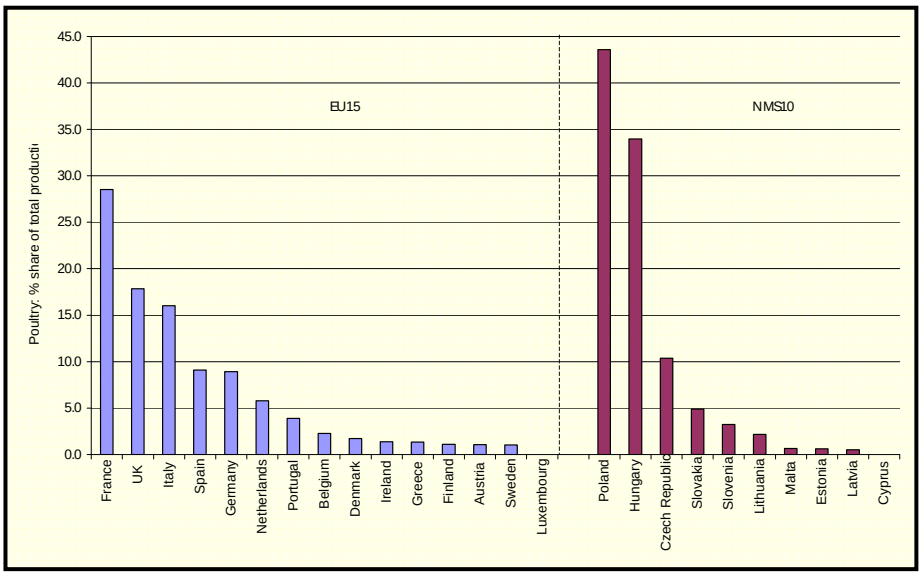
Three major welfare issues affecting chickens bred for meat



Source: RSPCA: Paying the price, 2005.

Figure 2

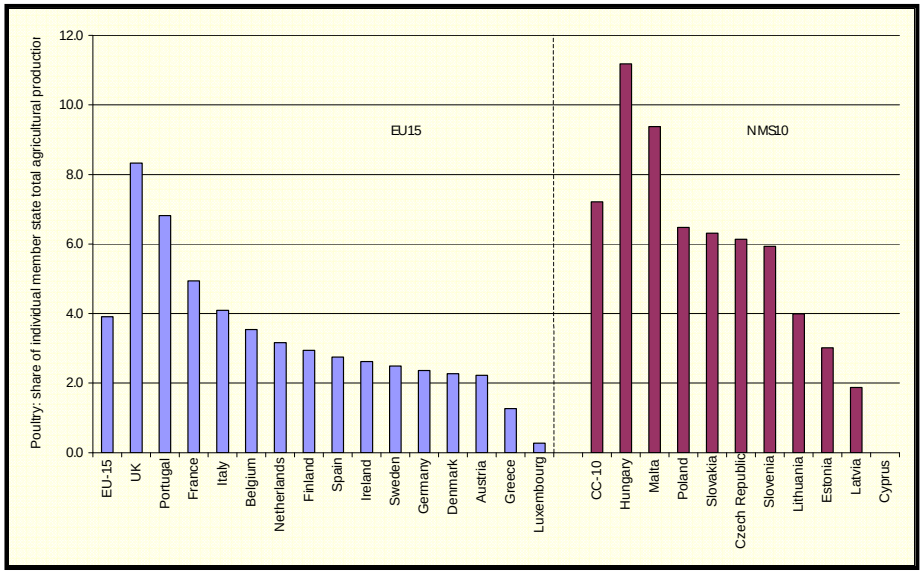
Poultry share of total production (%) 2002



Source: European Commission, Eurostat (Economic Accounts for Agriculture)

Figure 3

Poultry share of the member states' total agricultural production (%) 2002



Source: European Commission, Eurostat (Economic Accounts for Agriculture)

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