

Commission proposes legislation to improve welfare of broiler chickens

The Commission has adopted a proposal for a Directive on the protection of chickens kept for meat production (broilers). Scientific studies have revealed serious health and welfare shortcomings in the intensive farming of chickens. The legislation came as a response to the long-standing appeal of Member States and citizens for the Commission to take action in this area.

Markos Kyprianou, Commissioner for Health and Consumer Protection said: "Animal welfare is not just about ethics, it is also a quality issue for consumers. The number of chickens slaughtered every year is higher than in any other livestock sector in the EU. Intensive farming methods in this sector have led to significant welfare problems and consumers have repeatedly expressed concern about the welfare of chickens. The results-oriented approach set out in the proposal will ensure concrete improvements for the animals while also allowing farmers some flexibility in their farming methods, as long as they continue to meet the set welfare standards."

The proposal sets out a basic maximum stocking density of 30 kg live animals per square metre as well as a number of minimum conditions to ensure animal welfare. Farmers must ensure appropriate access to litter, drinkers and feed as well as proper ventilation. Buildings must have a certain amount of light and there must be at minimum two daily inspections. Any chickens that are seriously injured or in poor health must be treated or immediately culled. These minimum standards are supplemented by detailed record-keeping requirements on issues such as house temperatures, medical treatments administered or mortality rates. The evidence is that welfare problems are more likely above a stocking density of 30 kg/m², but farms that meet enhanced welfare conditions will be allowed to stock up to 38 kg/m² as long as inspections at slaughter continue to prove that the animals have not suffered particular welfare problems.

This is the first EU legislation in this specific area. Currently only the general requirements of Directive 98/58/EC on the welfare of farm animals apply, in addition to national legislation and codes of practice. During the consultation phase, the draft proposal was welcomed by animal protection organisations, consumer groups and by industry. The animal welfare requirements in the proposal will bring greater clarity to the trade in broilers by creating common minimum rules to be applied across the EU. The checks to monitor animal welfare are integrated into existing veterinary controls in order to minimise any extra burden on producers and inspectors.

Next steps

The Directive now has to be examined by the Council and the European Parliament will be consulted. The proposal requires the Commission to report within two years on a possible mandatory labelling scheme based on compliance with the animal welfare standards in the Directive. The European Commission plans further developments in the area of animal welfare, which will be set out in an upcoming EU Action Plan.

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