



# The welfare of chickens used for meat and the European Chicken Commitment

Chickens are active, social and curious animals with notable cognitive abilities and complex behavioural needs. They have a distinct vocal repertoire, with dozens of different kinds of calls. However, conventional chicken production fails to account for the complexity of these birds and causes serious welfare issues.

The science is clear: chickens raised for meat suffer greatly under conventional production methods. The European Chicken Commitment criteria aim to reduce this suffering.

## European Chicken Commitment (ECC)

The ECC is a set of science-based welfare criteria agreed by animal welfare organizations worldwide to improve the lives of chickens raised for meat across Europe.

The ECC sets out minimum standards for producers and businesses that produce or sell chicken meat, aiming to address the most urgent welfare issues in chicken production. The key areas include stocking density, growth rate, daylight, perches and enrichment, air quality, cages and slaughter.

The current EU law permits overcrowding, dim lighting, barren environments and inhumane slaughter. It also allows the use of fast-growing genetic lines of chickens, who grow to market weight so quickly that they are prone to debilitating, painful skeletal disorders and walking abnormalities.<sup>1,2,3</sup> The ECC standards provide guidance for producers and businesses to better adhere to science, respond to evolving consumer sentiment and demand, and prepare for future broiler chicken welfare legislation.

Lukas Vincour/Zvřata Nejlme/We Animals

**6.4 billion**

chickens were slaughtered in the European Union in 2023.<sup>4</sup>

**84%**

of Europeans want better protection for farmed animals.<sup>5</sup>

**10.0%**

increase in retail sales of free-range and organic chicken meat in the EU between 2018-2022.<sup>6</sup>

## Welfare issue

## How the ECC addresses it

### Overcrowding

Overcrowding in commercial facilities reduces the health of the birds,<sup>7</sup> by, for example, increasing the risk of intestinal disease.<sup>8</sup> It also reduces chickens' ability to express natural behaviour,<sup>9,10</sup> and avoid disturbance.<sup>11</sup> High stocking density means more manure, which can lead to wet litter, a cause of foot pad lesions. It can also contribute to reduced walking ability, which may be the result of constrained activity and reduced mobility.<sup>12</sup>

### Stocking density limits

The ECC sets limits on stocking density, the number of birds per square meter (m<sup>2</sup>), to ensure chickens have enough space to move and express natural behaviour.

### Rapid growth

Selective breeding for rapid weight gain causes severe welfare problems, including reduced mobility,<sup>13</sup> disproportionate kidney and lung size,<sup>14</sup> and muscle damage, including wooden breast syndrome and white striping.<sup>15</sup> Many chickens suffer from lameness and difficulty walking.<sup>16,17,18</sup> In most flocks, by the time they approach slaughter weight, there are birds who become so crippled that they are unable to reach feed and water.

### Higher welfare breeds

The ECC promotes the use of slower-growing, higher welfare breeds to reduce the health problems associated with rapid weight gain, improving mobility and overall welfare.

Chickens raised conventionally are bred for extremely rapid weight gain.<sup>19</sup>



**1957**

0.9 kg in 56 days



**1978**

1.8 kg in 56 days



**2005**

4.2 kg in 56 days



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## Welfare issue

## How the ECC addresses it

### Dim lighting

Lights are generally kept on at a low level for 18-20 hours a day to encourage the birds to eat more and gain weight faster. However, poor lighting disrupts sleep and the production of melatonin,<sup>20</sup> a hormone regulating growth and immune function. The short night and prolonged hours of light can worsen skeletal issues.<sup>21,22,23</sup>

### Improved lighting

The ECC mandates higher light intensity, including natural daylight, to support better day and night cycles.



*"The science is clear: chickens raised for meat suffer immensely under conventional production methods. The ECC criteria directly address the most pressing welfare issues and are designed to meaningfully reduce this suffering."*

— **Dr. Sara Shields**, Director, Farm Animal Welfare Science, Humane World for Animals

### Barren environments

Except for feed and water lines, conventional production facilities are empty barns. The chickens are unable to express their natural curiosity or innate behaviour patterns such as perching or foraging. They have little to do but sleep or eat.

### Perches and environmental enrichment

The ECC requires that chickens have access to perches for roosting and pecking materials to create a more stimulating environment and improve their quality of life.



## Welfare issue

## How the ECC addresses it

### Poor air quality

Crowded indoor settings can expose chickens to poor air quality due to pollutants including dust, bacteria, fungal spores and gases (carbon dioxide and ammonia), impacting respiration and health.<sup>24</sup> Excessive ammonia levels over long periods of time can reduce the growth of chickens and increase flock mortality rate.<sup>25</sup>

### Cleaner air

The ECC sets standards for ventilation to maintain air quality and reduce exposure to pollutants, leading to improved air quality in the barn to support health and welfare.

### Cages

The use of cages for chickens limits both floor space and height, restricting movement and preventing natural behaviour such as foraging and dustbathing. The lack of movement and exercise is so severe that it can reduce bone strength.<sup>26,27,28</sup> Broiler chickens kept for meat production are not typically reared in cages in the EU, but breeding birds (i.e., parent and grandparent generations) may be housed in cages or multitier systems where their movement is restricted, and they do not have access to litter.

### No cages

The ECC prohibits the use of cages or multitier systems for broiler chickens. Broiler chicken cages cause severe welfare problems because chickens are so tightly crowded they barely have space to spread their wings.



## Welfare issue

## How the ECC addresses it

### Ineffective stunning

The common electrical waterbath stunning method causes fear, stress and pain. The birds are first inverted (hung by their feet, upside down in shackles) while fully conscious. They may flap their wings to right themselves. The stunning is inconsistent, meaning that not all chickens are successfully rendered unconscious,<sup>29,30</sup> causing severe pain and distress as their throats are cut for exsanguination.

### Improved stunning without live inversion

The ECC requires that slaughterhouses use controlled atmosphere stunning with inert gas or multiphase systems, or effective electrical stunning without live inversion, which improve animal welfare. These practices ensure chickens are rendered unconscious before they are handled and shackled upside down on the line, reducing their suffering.



## The Pecking Order

Since 2023, Humane World for Animals has been publishing The Pecking Order reports, evaluating the chicken welfare policies and progress of major fast-food brands in Poland and Romania. The report highlights an urgent need for Poland's and Romania's fast-food industry to accelerate its efforts to adopt higher welfare standards for chickens raised for meat—especially given growing consumer demand for more humane food production. Additionally, the report outlines actionable steps for the industry, lawmakers and consumers to drive meaningful change.

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