

The case for stronger EU chicken welfare legislation

Chickens raised for meat are the most farmed land animals in Europe. In 2023 alone, over 6.4 billion chickens were slaughtered in the European Union.¹ Yet current laws and industry practices fail to meet even basic welfare needs, causing serious welfare issues. The European Chicken Commitment (ECC) criteria aim to reduce this suffering.

The need for updated legislation

The EU's main legislative frameworks for farm animals—the 1998 Directive on the protection of animals kept for farming purposes (98/58/EC) and the 2007 Broiler Directive (2007/43/EC) - set minimum welfare standards for chickens kept and slaughtered for meat. However, these standards are outdated and do not reflect current scientific understanding or societal expectations.

In its 2020 Farm to Fork Strategy, the European Commission committed to revising and expanding EU's animal welfare legislation by the end of 2023. However, no legislative proposals on the welfare of animals on-farm have been published to date. The Commission has since indicated that its first proposal on on-farm welfare standards is now expected in 2026.

In 2023, the European Food Safety Authority (EFSA) published a series of *scientific opinions* on farm animal welfare, which highlight the shortcomings in current law and the need for legislative change to improve the welfare of animals kept and killed for food.

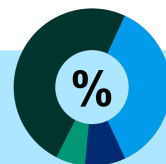
European Chicken Commitment

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.^{2,3,4} The ECC standards align with the EFSA recommendations providing 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.

On the next page, a comparison is made between the current EU legislation to ECC criteria.



Europeans and farm animal welfare

84% of Europeans want better protection for farmed animals.⁵

89% of European consumers state that it is important to implement stricter rules for farm animal welfare.⁶

Comparison between current EU legislation and ECC criteria

Criteria	EU legislation ⁷	ECC requirement ⁸
Legislation	General Directive on the protection of animals kept for farming purposes and directive for chickens kept for meat production	Compliance with EU animal welfare directives, regardless of the country of production
Stocking density	A maximum stocking density of 33 - 42 kg/m ²	A maximum stocking density of 30 kg/m ²
Breeds	Low welfare, fast-growing genetic lines permitted	Only slower-growing genetic lines with higher welfare outcomes permitted
Daylight	At least 20 lux light intensity	At least 50 lux light intensity, including natural light
Perches	No requirements	At least 2 meters of usable perch space per 1,000 birds
Enrichment	No requirements	At least 2 pecking substrates per 1,000 birds
Air quality	Requirements for the holdings: (a) the concentration of ammonia (NH₃) does not exceed 20 ppm and the concentration of carbon dioxide (CO₂) does not exceed 3,000 ppm measured at the level of the chickens' heads; (b) the inside temperature, when the outside temperature measured in the shade exceeds 30 degrees C, does not exceed this outside temperature by more than 3 degrees C; (c) the average relative humidity measured inside the house during 48 hours does not exceed 70% when the outside temperature is below 10 degrees C.	At least the requirements of Annex 2.3 of the EU Directive protecting chickens raised for meat (as stated under EU legislation)
Cages	Cages allowed	No cages or multitier systems ^a
Slaughter	Electrical waterbath stunning permitted	Controlled atmospheric stunning using inert gas or multiphase systems, or effective electrical stunning without live inversion
External audits	Authorities carry out inspections to verify compliance on an adequate proportion of animals kept within each Member State	Required to demonstrate compliance

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.



References

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