



November 14, 2013

Mr. Mike J. Brown
President, National Chicken Council
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Mr. Mike Helgeson
Incoming Board Chairman, National Chicken Council
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Dear Sirs;

As you may know, the American Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (ASPCA®) recently launched an effort dedicated to improving the welfare of chickens raised for meat in the U.S. Our research shows that the current unprecedented growth rates and standard living conditions of chickens not only pose serious concerns for their welfare, but may also present food safety risks.

The National Chicken Council (“NCC”) will release new guidelines for chicken welfare before the end of this year. As the body that essentially sets industry standards, the NCC determines the quality of life for billions of birds. We urge you to update your guidelines with meaningful recommendations to address welfare concerns related to both growth rate and husbandry, reflecting the values and expectations of chicken consumers.

Americans are concerned by current practices in the chicken industry, and demand exists for more humanely raised chickens: In just six weeks, more than 100,000 individuals signed our petition calling for slower-growing chickens raised in better conditions. In a national survey by Lake Research Partners commissioned by the ASPCA, seven in ten consumers said they are willing to spend more money for higher welfare chicken.

We recognize that some of the NCC’s member companies have made limited welfare improvements to some of their lines. However, we believe that truly meaningful welfare progress can only be achieved through slower growth and accompanying husbandry changes. Most chickens today grow so big, so fast that they struggle to stay standing¹ and spend much of their lives lying in their own waste² with open sores³ that can act as gateways to infection. Genetic selection for more breast meat and faster growth has led to inactive chickens with insatiable appetites⁴, suffering from higher rates of heart failure⁵, low stamina⁶, labored breathing⁷ and lameness⁸. Overcrowding due to excessively high stocking densities⁹

¹ Paxton, Heather et. al., [The Gait Dynamics of modern broilers: A Cautionary Tale of Selective Breeding](#), *Journal of Experimental Biology* 216, 2013

² Bessei, W., [Welfare of broilers: a review](#), *World’s Poultry Science Journal* Vol 62/3, 2006

³ Jong, Ingrid, et. al. [Simplifying the Welfare Quality Assessment Protocol for Broilers](#) Wageningen UR Livestock Research, 2011

⁴ Schmidt, C.J., et. al. [Comparison of a modern broiler line and a heritage line unselected since the 1950’s](#), *Poultry Science* 88, 2009

⁵ Olkowski, A.A., [Pathophysiology of Heart Failure in Broiler Chickens: Structural, Biochemical, and Molecular Characteristics](#), *Poultry Science* 86, 2007

Van Middelkoop, Koos, et. al., [Slower Growing broilers pose lower welfare risks](#), *World Poultry* 18, 2002

⁶ Van Middelkoop, Koos, 2002

⁷ Paxton, 2013

⁸ Siegel, P. B. et. al., [Motor ability and self-selection of an analgesic drug by fast-growing chickens](#), *Journal of Applied Poultry Research*, 2011

on most farms, combined with lack of indoor enrichment,¹⁰ further prevents the already weakened¹¹ birds from adequately exercising, exacerbating other difficulties¹². Near constant lighting¹³ on many farms to encourage eating also contributes to sleep deprivation, inactivity, frustration and stress¹⁴. On the other hand, research shows that slower-growing birds raised with lower stocking density, natural light and enriched environments suffer from significantly lower rates of hock burns, breast blisters and foot pad dermatitis.¹⁵ They are also better able to walk and have a higher level of overall welfare.¹⁶

We strongly urge you to consider updating your new guidelines to include recommendations for the following items, and would be happy to meet with you to discuss particulars:

- Slower-growing breeds of chicken whose genetics allow for better mobility and stamina
- A stocking density that affords chickens more space than the current standard
- Natural light in sheds that encourages movement during the daytime and adequate rest at night
- Environmental enrichment such as straw bales that provide both physical exercise and mental stimulation and allow the birds a place to perch

We have invited our members and supporters who have shown concern about this issue to sign a letter requesting that you update your welfare guidelines to call for slower growth and better living conditions. To date, more than 40,000 people have signed and we will be submitting the growing list of names to you very shortly.

Thank you for considering these critical improvements to meaningfully impact the lives of billions of animals. Again, we welcome the opportunity to discuss these issues with you in more detail and look forward to hearing from you.



Suzanne McMillan
Director, Farm Animal Welfare
ASPCA

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Knowles, Toby, [Leg Disorders in Broiler Chickens: Prevalence, Risk Factors and Prevention](#), *PLoS ONE* 3(2), 2008

Oviedo-Rondon, E.O. et. al., [Incubation conditions affect leg health in large, high-yield broilers](#), *The Journal of Applied Poultry Research*, 2009

Paxton, 2013

Jong, 2011

⁹ Knowles, 2008

¹⁰ EFSA Panel on Animal Health and Welfare, [Scientific opinion on the influence of genetic parameters on the welfare and the resistance to stress of commercial broilers](#), *EFSA Journal*, 2010

¹¹ Schmidt, 2009

¹² Sherlock, Louise, et. al, [The Relationship between physical activity and leg health in the broiler chicken](#), *Poultry Science*, 2009

¹³ Oviedo-Rondon, E.O., 2009

¹⁴ Editor, [Link Between Broiler Intensification and Foodborne Pathogens Explored](#), *The Poultry Site*, 2011

Oviedo-Rondon, E.O

¹⁵ Jong, 2011

¹⁶ EFSA, 2010