

## **Implementation of the Welfare Quality®: on-farm protocol for assessing broiler welfare**

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European consumers have been shown to be concerned about the welfare of broilers chicken for meat production; in their opinion broilers, as well as laying hens, are perceived to be raised in worse welfare conditions than pigs and cattle and other farmed animals and are considered the species for which welfare should be improved the most. A major objective of the EU project Welfare Quality (WQ) is to develop a set of European technical documents which will enable the assessment of the welfare of farmed animals on farm and at slaughter through the use of an overall assessment system which is scientifically valid and accepted by stakeholders. As welfare is multi-dimensional, the WQ assessment system is a multi-criteria evaluation process composed of four main principles and twelve criteria hierarchically organised; each principle and criteria corresponding to a set of parameters to be measured and evaluated by means of measures on animals, measures of resources and through collection of information about management. A specific assessment tool has been developed to assess welfare of broilers on farm, during transport and at slaughter and additionally, a wide range of data about the whole production cycle is collected from the hatchery, the farm and the slaughterhouse. The assessment is carried out by trained personnel who visit the farm, assess the farm records, the flock and the equipment, interview the farmer and inspect a representative sample of animals. Particular attention is paid to the assessment of mortality, health conditions and lameness of the animals. Specific tests are performed to evaluate the expression of natural and social behaviours among the animals and the relationship between animals and humans. In intensive flocks conditions of poor hygiene were found on 47% of the inspected birds while relevant lesions due to foot pad dermatitis were found on 44% of them; reactivity of birds to a novel object and to a human approach was assessed by means of specific behavioural tests: the Novel Object Test (NOT), the Touch Test Ratio (TTR) and the Avoidance Test (AT). The mean results of such measures on intensive farmed broilers were 25 birds for NOT, 0,38 for TTR and 62 cm for AT. These first results of the implementation of the WQ on-farm protocol to assess broiler welfare were collected in a sample of UK, Dutch and Italian farms.

**Keywords:** broilers welfare, animal welfare assessment, behavioural test, lameness, foot pad dermatitis