Welfare of broilers during catching and transport to slaughter

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Abstract

Broiler meat enjoys a high preference by the consumer because of its white colour, light structure, convenient meal preparation and relatively low price. More than 10 years ago intensive discussions started on the welfare of these birds when kept indoors in large flocks and maximum animal densities were introduced (e.g. 35 kg/m³) in various European countries. Little attention was paid for a long time to the condition of these birds when picked up from the floor, removed from the animal house at the end of the fattening period and transported to the slaughter house where electrical stunning is usually applied.

The common catching process by hand entails a high risk not only of stress but also of injury and death to the birds. More or less well trained “catchers” take the birds by their legs and put them into transport containers where 30 or 40 animals are sitting closely together. Associated injury and mortality rates have important implications not only for animal welfare but also for the economics of the procedure. Most common classes of injuries are bruises on breast, back, wings and legs, fractures of wings and legs and dislocation of wings and legs. Additionally, this is a bone breaking type of work when 4 to 5 people load up to 10,000 animals per hour. Therefore, catching machines were developed which are advantageous with regard to labour costs and standards, and they may also reduce damage to the birds. The machines most commonly used presently in Europe are of the sweeper-type with a vertical three-rotor pick-up head with soft rubber fingers. Comparisons between machine catching and hand catching of 83 events (40 manual, 43 mechanical) including about 1.9 million broilers (860,000 manually caught, 1.1 million mechanically) revealed a total amount of all injuries of 3.13 % after machine catching and 4.51 % of hand catching. Injury rates of all types were significantly reduced after mechanical catching, improvement was highest with respect to leg injuries, (108 068 mechanically caught and 87 916 manually caught birds examined for injuries on the shackles at the processing plant). However, it seems that conveyor speed and the experience of the catching team have an important influence on the amount of injuries. There were more injuries at higher speed. Experimental data show that dead-on-arrival rates (D.O.A.) can range between 0.4 % and 0.6 %. They depend more on the environmental conditions than on the method of catching. Relatively high D.O.A. rates appear regularly in spring time. Loading densities, journey times and waiting periods at the abattoir together with climatic conditions can strongly influence D.O.A. rates. The loading of the transport containers with equal numbers of birds and the training of the catching team are crucial for the protection of the health and welfare of broiler birds prior to stunning and slaughter. Careful handling of animals in this period is equally important as the sound and animal friendly raising of the animals in their animal houses for the production of a healthy and a wholesome food for the consumer who increasingly asks for the ethical aspects of animal production and who has the right to know whether he consumes meat from healthy animals.