

EU sets welfare rules for broilers

The Council of the European Union has laid down rules for the protection of chickens kept for meat production. The recently accepted and published directive comes into force as of July 2010, and restricts producers in terms of stocking density.

By Wiebe van der Sluis

As of 30 June, 2010, European broiler growers will have to follow guidelines that dictate a maximum stocking density. After several years of discussing broiler welfare issues the Council of the European Union accepted a Directive with rules to meet the general wellbeing of these birds kept in intensive farming systems. In order to avoid disproportionate measures applicable to the keeping of small flocks of chickens, the Directive sets minimum guidelines. These guidelines are based on the report "Welfare of Chickens Kept

The maximum stocking density in EU broiler houses will, as of 30 June 2010, be 33 kg/m² live weight, unless excellent management results prove that a grower can handle more birds per square meter without jeopardising the welfare of the birds.

for Meat Production (Broilers)" of the Scientific Committee on Animal Health and Animal Welfare, which appeared on 21 March, 2000. This report concluded that the fast growth rate of chicken strains currently used for meat production is not accompanied by a satisfactory level of animal welfare and health. However, it also states that the negative effects of high stocking rates are reduced in buildings where good indoor climatic conditions can be sustained. This implies that bird welfare partly depends on flock management. The Directive therefore demands that people attending to chickens have an understanding of the relevant animal welfare requirements, and that they receive appropriate training to perform their tasks or have acquired experience equivalent to such training.

A mandatory scheme

The Directive recognises that in establishing rules for the protection of chickens kept for meat production, a balance should be kept between the various aspects to be taken into account regarding

animal welfare, health, economic and social considerations and the environmental impact. Different EU Member States have already adopted voluntary schemes for the labelling of chicken meat based on the compliance with animal welfare standards, amongst other parameters. In light of the experience gained in applying such voluntary labelling schemes, the EU Commission felt it was appropriate to introduce a specific harmonised mandatory labelling scheme at EU Community level. This scheme applies to chicken meat, meat products and preparations based on compliance with animal welfare standards (including the possible socioeconomic implications), the effects on the Community's economic partners, and compliance of such a labelling scheme with World Trade Organisation rules.

Meanwhile, the EU Commission will take new scientific evidence into account to further improve the welfare of chickens kept for meat production, including the parent stock of such chickens, particularly aspects not covered by

the Directive. The Commission is specifically looking for possibilities to introduce thresholds for indications of poor welfare conditions identified during post-mortem inspections and the influence of genetic parameters on identified deficiencies resulting in poor welfare of chickens kept for meat production.

The scope of the Directive applies to all chickens kept for meat production with the exception of: holdings with fewer than 500 chickens; holdings with only breeding stocks of chickens; hatcheries; holdings with extensive indoor and free-range chickens; and, organically reared chickens. The latter groups of producers can be exempted due to the fact that they have to comply with more stringent rules laid down in other directives. However, this Directive will also concern rearing stock on holdings which have both breeding stock and rearing stock.

Specific requirements

Besides the basic needs, such as feed, water and shelter (*see box*), producers should ensure that the birds receive the required health care carried out by a competent authority or veterinarian. A key note in the Directive is that there will be a maximum stocking density in a holding or a house of a holding, which does not at any time exceed 33 kg/m².

By way of derogation, Member States may allow chickens to be kept at a higher stocking density provided the owner or keeper complies with additional requirements. When such derogation is granted, the maximum stocking density in a holding or a house of a holding will never exceed 39 kg/m². An exception for an additional 3 kg/m² can be made to those producers who show to do extremely well. Those producers should demonstrate that in at least seven consecutive and subsequently checked flocks from a house that the cumulative daily mortality rate was below 1% + 0,06% multiplied by the slaughter age of the flock in days. This should be monitored by a competent authority within the last two years whereby no deficiencies with respect to the requirements of this Directive have been noticed.

Environment control

A producer can apply for a higher than the basic 33 kg/m² live weight stocking density by indicating to the competent authority the exact figure of any change in the stocking density at least 15 days prior to the placement of the flock in the house. The broiler grower shall then maintain compiled documentation describing in detail the production systems. In particular it shall include information on technical details of the house and its equipment.

There is a specific paragraph dedicated to environmental control within the Directive. Producers have to ensure that each house of a holding is equipped

Basic requirements for broilers

In addition to the relevant provisions of other relevant Community legislations, the EU Directive on broiler welfare sets basic requirements. This will apply for all holdings of chickens kept for meat production.

- ▶ **Drinkers** - Drinkers shall be positioned and maintained in such a way that spillage is minimised.
- ▶ **Feeding** - Feed shall be either continuously available or be meal fed and must not be withdrawn from chickens more than 12 hours before the expected slaughter time.
- ▶ **Litter** - All chickens shall have permanent access to litter, which is dry and friable on the surface.
- ▶ **Ventilation and heating** - Ventilation shall be sufficient to avoid overheating and, where necessary, in combination with heating systems to remove excessive moisture.
- ▶ **Noise** - The sound level shall be minimised. Ventilation fans, feeding machinery or other equipment shall be constructed, placed, operated and maintained in such a way that they cause the least possible amount of noise.
- ▶ **Light** - All buildings shall have lighting with an intensity of at least 20 lux during the lighting periods, measured at bird eye level and illuminating at least 80% of the useable area. A temporary reduction in the lighting level may be allowed when necessary following veterinary advice.
 - Within seven days from the time when the chickens are placed in the building and until three days before the foreseen time of slaughter, the lighting must follow a 24-hour rhythm and include periods of darkness lasting at least six hours in total, with at least one uninterrupted period of darkness of at least four hours, excluding dimming periods.
- ▶ **Inspection** - All chickens kept on the holding must be inspected at least twice a day. Special attention should be paid to signs indicating a reduced level of animal welfare and/or animal health.
 - Chickens that are seriously injured or show evident signs of health disorders, such as those having difficulties

in walking, severe ascites or severe malformations, and are likely to suffer, shall receive appropriate treatment or be culled immediately. A veterinarian shall be contacted whenever necessary.

- ▶ **Cleaning** - Those parts of buildings, equipment or utensils that are in contact with the chickens shall be thoroughly cleaned and disinfected every time after final depopulation is carried out, before a new flock is introduced into the house. After the final depopulation of a house, all litter must be removed, and clean litter must be provided.
- ▶ **Record keeping** - The owner or keeper shall maintain a record for each house of a holding of:
 - a. The number of chickens introduced
 - b. The useable area
 - c. The hybrid or breed of the chickens, if known;
 - d. By each control, the number of birds found dead with an indication of the causes, if known as well as the number of birds culled with cause
 - e. The number of chickens remaining in the flock following the removal of chickens for sale or for slaughter.Those records shall be retained for a period of at least three years and shall be made available to the competent authority when carrying out an inspection, or when otherwise requested.
- ▶ **Surgical interventions** - All surgical interventions carried out for reasons other than therapeutic or diagnostic purposes, which result in damage to or the loss of a sensitive part of the body or the alteration of bone structure, shall be prohibited. However, beak trimming may be authorised by Member States when other measures to prevent feather pecking and cannibalism are exhausted. In such cases it shall be carried out only after consultation and on the advice of a veterinarian and shall be carried out by qualified staff on chickens that are less than 10 days old. In addition, Member States may authorise the castration of chickens. The castration shall only be carried out under veterinary supervision by personnel who have received specific training.

with ventilation and, if necessary, heating and cooling systems. They have to be designed, constructed and operated in such a way that the concentration of ammonia (NH₃) does not exceed 20 ppm and that the concentration of carbon dioxide (CO₂) does not exceed 3000 ppm measured at the level of the chickens' heads. When the outside temperature measured in the shade exceeds 30°C, the inside temperature shall not exceed this outside temperature by more than 3°C. During cold weather, when the outside temperature is below 10°C, the average relative humidity measured inside the house during 48 hours may not exceed 70%.

Monitoring and follow-up

In the case of stocking densities, producers operating with above 33 kg/m² have to keep flock documentation, including the daily and the cumulative daily mortality rate. This data, as well as the number of broilers dead on arrival, shall be recorded under the supervision of an official veterinarian. The plausibility of the data and of the cumulative daily

mortality rate shall be checked taking into account the number of broilers slaughtered and the number of broilers dead on arrival at the slaughterhouse.

In the context of post-mortem controls, the official veterinarian shall evaluate the results of the post-mortem inspection to identify other possible indications of poor welfare conditions, such as abnormal levels of contact dermatitis, parasitism and systemic illness in the holding or the unit of the house of the holding of origin.

If the mortality rate or the results of the post-mortem inspection are consistent with poor animal welfare conditions, the official veterinarian shall communicate the data to the owner or keeper of the animals as well as to the authorities involved. Appropriate action shall then be taken by the producer and the competent authority. The latter can ultimately force the producer to maintain the official maximum stocking density. In case of frequent failures to meet the welfare requirements, sanctions can be taken to the owner and keeper of the holding. ■