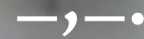




Policy Brief #2



The European Institute
for Animal Law & Policy

ACHIEVING BETTER TREATMENT FOR ANIMALS

A Lifetime of Suffering

Why EU Policymakers Need to Focus on the
Welfare of Fast-Growing Chickens Kept for Meat

Executive Summary

1 Food and Agriculture Organisation of the United Nations (2023).

2 *Ibid.*

At least six billion chickens are killed in the EU every year for meat, making them the most numerous farmed animal in the bloc.¹ Chickens are also the most numerous domestic animal worldwide, with around 70 billion slaughtered each year.²

Over the past decades, chickens kept for meat (also called 'broilers') have been subjected to intensive selective breeding aimed at accelerating muscle growth to maximize profits – at the expense of animal health and welfare.

Despite being covered by species-specific protection under Council Directive 2007/43/EC, the welfare of chickens kept for meat remains poor under EU law. The legislation allows harmful practices, such as overcrowding through high stocking densities, and does not require environmental enrichment to encourage chickens to be active, leading to chickens living in mostly barren sheds.

The prevailing model of broiler chicken farming causes chickens to suffer for most of their lives, with their bodies unable to handle such rapid growth. This wide-spread cruelty inflicted on sentient beings brings not only huge ethical concerns, but also calls into question the whole food system and its long-term sustainability.

This brief argues that EU policymakers should prioritize the welfare of chickens kept for meat in this political term because it is 'Three Es':

EFFECTIVE

Chickens are the most numerous farmed animal in the EU. Improving their welfare issues could bring significant positive results for the overall welfare of farmed animals in Europe.

ETHICAL

Selective breeding has an enormous impact on chickens, making it virtually impossible for them to live a quality life. It is morally unacceptable to inflict this level of suffering on sentient beings solely for profit.

EXPECTED

Despite the severity of this welfare crisis, the welfare of chickens is largely overlooked by EU policymakers. As citizens' expectations for better treatment of farmed animals in the EU grow, this new term is an opportunity to address these concerns.

1. The Plight of Chickens: Health-Damaging Growth

³ European Food Safety Authority (2023). *Welfare of broilers on farm*. EFSA Journal, 21(2). ISSN 1831-4732. doi: 10.2903/j.efsa.2023.7788.

⁴ R.F. Wideman et al (2013). *Pulmonary arterial hypertension (ascites syndrome) in broilers: A review*. Poultry Science 92(1). ISSN 0032-5791. doi: 10.3382/ps.2012-02745.

⁵ M.J. Zuidhof et al (2014). *Growth, efficiency, and yield of commercial broilers from 1957, 1978, and 2005*. Poultry Science 93(12). ISSN 0032-5791. doi: 10.3382/ps.2014-04291.

Most chickens kept for meat are killed at the age of 5-6 weeks, which is extremely early considering that chickens can naturally live up to 10 years. During this short period, they reach the weight of approximately 2.5 kilograms.³ To illustrate how harmful and outrageous that rapid growth is, if a human child grew at the same rate, a two-month-old baby would weigh 300 kilograms.⁴ The reason for this unnaturally quick muscle growth lies in selective breeding, i.e., the human-controlled process of choosing parents with desirable traits to amplify those traits in their offspring. Comparing the difference between a 56-day old chicken in 1957 and 2005, the chickens now gain about five times more weight as they did 50 years ago over the same period of time.⁵

Not surprisingly, this growth rate and disproportionately large breast muscle put a huge strain on a chicken's body, negatively impacting their health and overall welfare. The consequences of rapid growth include metabolic illnesses, cardiovascular illnesses, and locomotion disorders such as lameness or even



Intensive farming of broiler chickens means that animals are crammed, with space per individual growing smaller as the animals grow larger. Czechia, 2020 © Lukáš Vincour / We Animals

6 C.J. Nicol (2015). *The Behavioral Biology of Chickens*. Wallingford, Oxfordshire: CABI. ISBN 9781780642499.

7 European Public Health Alliance (2022). *Ending Routine Farm Antibiotic Use in Europe* [online][cit. 02.10.2024]. Retrieved from: <https://epha.org/ending-routine-farm-antibiotic-use/>.

8 D.M. Broom (2022). *Broom and Fraser's Domestic Animal Behavior and Welfare* (6th edition). Wallingford, Oxfordshire: CABI. ISBN 978-1-78924-878-4.

9 Scientific Committee on Animal Health and Animal Welfare (2000). *The Welfare of Chickens Kept for Meat Production (Broilers)*. Retrieved from: https://food.ec.europa.eu/system/files/2020-12/sci-com_scah_out39_en.pdf.

10 D.M. Broom (2022). *Broom and Fraser's Domestic Animal Behavior and Welfare* (6th edition). CAB International, Wallingford, Oxfordshire, 2022. ISBN 978-1-78924-878-4.

complete immobility, as chickens are unable to carry the weight of their muscles at a time when they are still baby animals. Fast-growing chickens also show compromised immune function and lower resistance to diseases.⁶ Since animals are usually kept in huge flocks of thousands, with 90% of chickens in the EU kept in intensive farming,⁷ there is virtually no chance for a sick or injured individual animal to receive proper veterinary care.

As D.M. Broom states, "(i)n terms of how bad the problem is for individuals and numbers of animal affected, this is the most serious animal welfare problem in the world."⁸ The Scientific Committee on Animal Health and Animal Welfare also reported that the health problems faced by chickens kept for meat due to the selective breeding practices focused on their fast growth, result in "a weekly mortality that is 7 times higher than in pullets and 4 times higher than in slow growing meat type birds".⁹

Some of the conditions which are linked to the rapid growth of chickens include:

Leg disorders

Leg disorders worsen in chickens the heavier they become, which is not only painful for the animals but can impair their mobility to the point of not being able to reach feed or water. Chickens are bred to grow muscle mass very quickly, but the rest of the body fails to keep up, especially the leg bones.¹⁰ In 2010, EFSA noted



- 11 European Food Safety Authority (2010). *Scientific Opinion on the influence of genetic parameters on the welfare and the resistance to stress of commercial broilers*. EFSA Journal, 8(7). 1831-4732
- 12 D.M. Broom (2022). *Broom and Fraser's Domestic Animal Behavior and Welfare* (6th edition). CAB International, Wallingford, Oxfordshire, 2022. ISBN 978-1-78924-878-4.
- 13 I.C. de Jong et al. (2012). *Footpad dermatitis in Dutch broiler flocks: Prevalence and factors of influence*, Poultry Science, 91(7). ISSN 0032-5791. doi: 10.3382/ps.2012-02156.
- 14 Scientific Committee on Animal Health and Animal Welfare (2000). *The Welfare of Chickens Kept for Meat Production (Broilers)*. Retrieved from: https://food.ec.europa.eu/system/files/2020-12/sci-com_scah_out39_en.pdf.

that 30% of commercial chickens kept for meat suffer from leg abnormalities.¹¹

Dermatitis

As a result of decreased mobility, chickens lie down more. That means constant contact with litter, which quickly becomes covered with feces on a chicken farm. The corrosive effect of feces on the skin then leads to problems, such as breast burns, hock burns and footpad lesions.¹² For example, a study of 400 Dutch flocks found footpad lesions in 65% of chickens.¹³

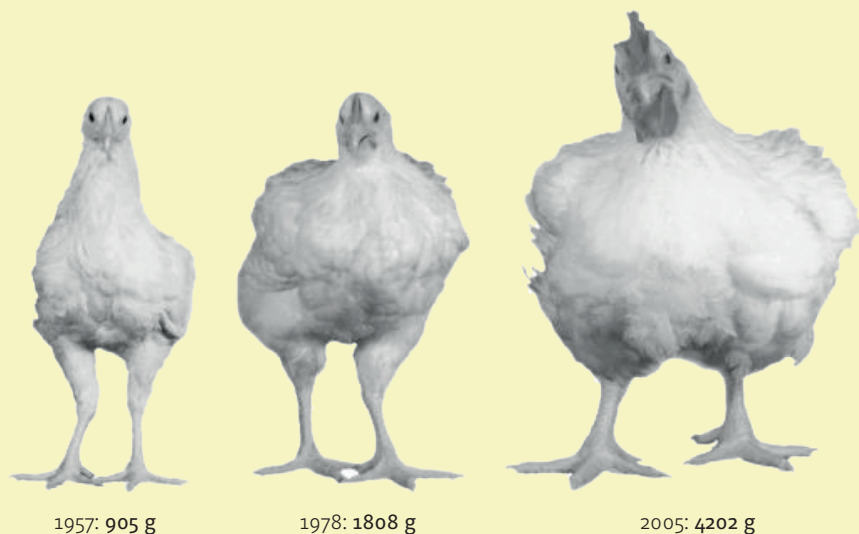
Ascites

Ascites is a lethal condition and refers to accumulation of fluid in the abdominal cavity caused by the imbalance between oxygen supply to the muscle and gut and oxygen requirements to sustain the rapid growth of modern chickens.

Sudden Death Syndrome


Sudden death syndrome is a metabolic condition that causes death in apparently healthy chickens, for no obvious reason. Also known as “flip-over syndrome” as animals convulse, flip over and die, the syndrome is a major cause of mortality, mainly in male chickens.¹⁴

Compare the growth of these commercial chickens (unselected since 1957 and 1978, and a commercial Ross 308 strain from 2005) at the age of 56 days. © R.F. Wideman, D.D. Rhoads, G.F. Erf, N.B. Anthony (2013)



2. Broiler Breeders: Hunger, Thirst, and Frustration

The issue of rapid growth becomes even more tragic when talking about broiler breeders, i.e., the parents to commercial chickens slaughtered for their meat, as well as earlier generations (grandparents, great-grandparents and pure or pedigree lines). As breeders live longer than chickens kept for meat, the industry limits their rapid growth to prevent more detrimental effects to their health and welfare, but also to reduce the costs of production. However, to achieve this, the birds' feed intake is restricted, primarily in parental and grandparental lines, leading to hunger. Hence, suffering is inevitable – either the animals suffer from serious health and welfare issues due to being obese, or they



Commercial chickens spend around 70-80% of their time resting, as their rapidly growing weight makes it harder to move around and the barren environments of chicken farms do not encourage activity. The constant contact with soiled litter leads to breast burns, hock burns and footpad dermatitis. Italy, 2021 © Stefano Belacchi

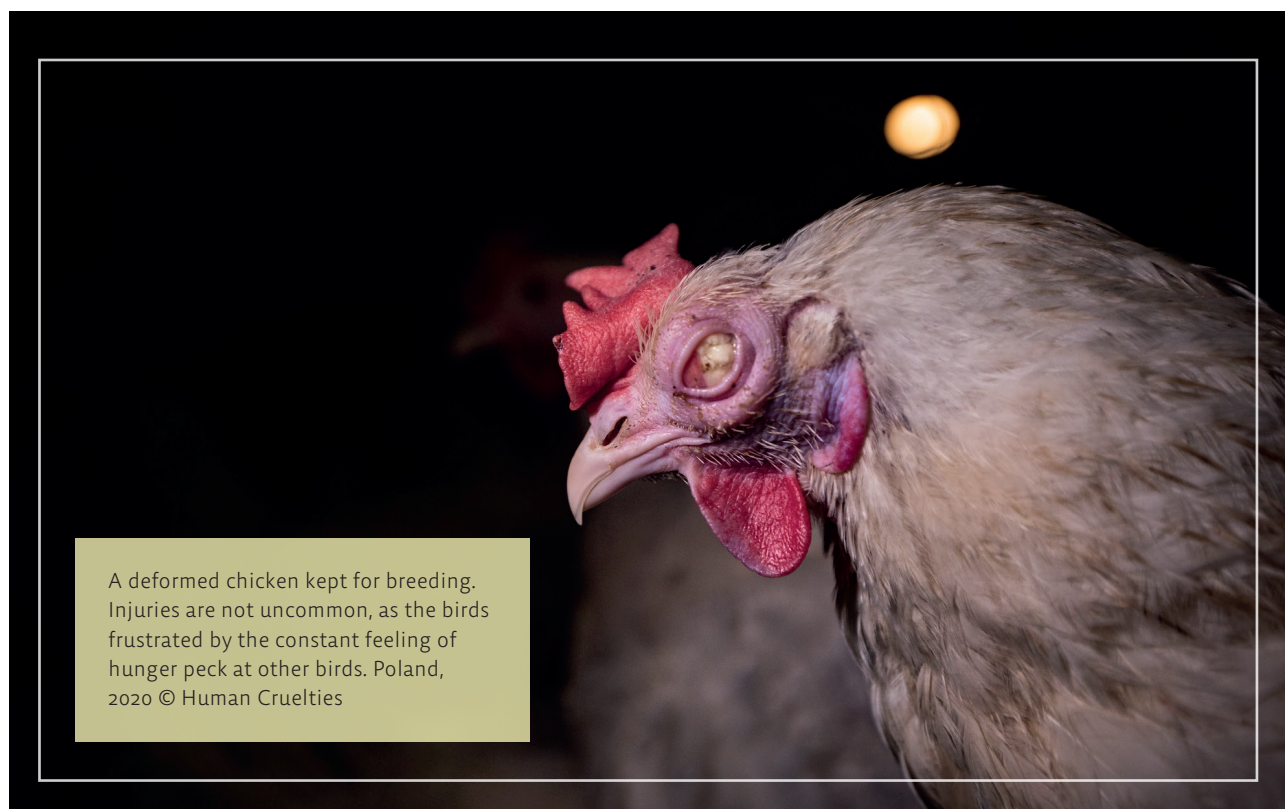
- 15 European Food Safety Authority (2023). *Welfare of broilers on farm*. EFSA Journal, 21(2). ISSN 1831-4732. doi: 10.2903/j.efsa.2023.7788.
- 16 I.C. de Jong, R.A. van Emous (2017). *Broiler breeding flocks: management and animal welfare*. Burleigh Dodds Science Publishing, 2017. ISBN 9781786760722.
- 17 Hubbard. Hubbard to become a subsidiary of Aviagen Group [online][cit. 02.10.2024]. Retrieved from: <https://www.hubbardbreeders.com/newsroom/hubbard-press-release/672-hubbard-to-become-a-subsiidiary-of-aviagen-group.html>.
- 18 S.J. Hiemstra, J.T. Napel (2013). *Study of the Impact of Genetic Selection on the Welfare of Chickens and Bred and Kept for Meat Production* [online][cit. 02.10.2024]. Retrieved from: https://food.ec.europa.eu/system/files/2016-10/aw_practice_farm_broilers_653020_final-report_en.pdf.

suffer from hunger due to severe feed restriction. This creates a dilemma with no good welfare outcome. As the daily feed portions are reduced, smaller and less dominant birds run the risk of not accessing feed.

Due to the prolonged hunger caused by feed restriction, the birds often exhibit stereotypical behaviors, such as pacing or pecking at objects, their flockmates, or even their own bodies, causing injuries to both themselves and others. Apart from this, they may increase their water intake to cope with hunger. As a standard practice, some farms limit access to water to avoid wetter, less quality litter. That leads to breeders suffering not only from prolonged hunger, but also prolonged thirst.¹⁵ During their life, feed restriction can reach 80% of what they would eat *ad libitum*.¹⁶

Breeding of broilers is globally controlled by two companies, Aviagen (which acquired another major market actor, Hubbard, in 2017)¹⁷ and Cobb-Vantres. Sites for pure lines, the top of the production pyramid, are "isolated and highly biosecure sites."¹⁸ The goal of these companies to retain competitive advantage by keeping information confidential makes the upper levels of the pyramid rather non-transparent and more difficult to access, leading to a lack of data (including on animal welfare and genetic diversity of these animals).





3. Legal Protection of Chickens under EU Law

- 19 European Commission (2017). Study on the application of the broiler directive DIR 2007/43/EC and development of welfare indicators: final report [online][cit. 02.10.2024]. Dostupné z: <https://data.europa.eu/doi/10.2875/729456>.
- 20 European Food Safety Authority (2023). Welfare of broilers on farm. EFSA Journal, 21(2). ISSN 1831-4732. doi: 10.2903/j.efsa.2023.7788.
- 21 Farm Animal Welfare Concil. Five Freedoms [online][cit. 02.10.2024]. Retrieved from: <https://webarchive.nationalarchives.gov.uk/ukgwa/20121010012427/http://www.fawc.org.uk/freedoms.htm>.
- 22 Note that so-called 'Five Domains' are a more appropriate tool to assess animal welfare, as it also acknowledges the importance of an animal's mental state. Five Freedoms is used in this context as it served as a framework for the currently applicable legislation on animal welfare in the EU.

Chickens kept for meat, like other vertebrate farmed animals in the EU, are covered by Directive 98/58/EC of 20 July 1998 concerning the protection of animals kept for farming purposes. Setting only very general obligations for animal keeping, the Directive's vague provisions hardly translate to reality. While the Directive states that "no animal shall be kept for farming purposes unless it can reasonably be expected, on the basis of its genotype or phenotype, that it can be kept without detrimental effect on its health or welfare," chickens are bred to the point where their bodies fail them while they are still essentially baby animals. The same Directive requires that animals are provided sufficient feed and water and their freedom of movement is not restricted in a way that causes suffering or injury, while broiler breeder farms routinely restrict birds' access to feed, and even water, and some of the animals in the pure and grandparent lines are caged.

The Broiler Directive adopted in 2007 sets specific standards for the keeping of chickens, but completely overlooks the issues of selective breeding, does not require any environmental enrichment and allows keeping chickens in very high stocking densities. While the maximum of 33 kg/m² is set as a rule, the Directive permits farms to increase it up to 42 kg/m² if certain conditions are met. As a result, less than a third of EU chickens are kept in stocking densities lower than 33 kg/m².¹⁹ Scientific findings point to the risks of high stocking densities for chickens, which include heat stress, inability to engage in natural behaviors, higher incidence of injuries, group stress and rest problems.²⁰ Broiler breeders are excluded from the scope of the Broiler Directive, thus only Directive 98/58/EC applies.

Animal welfare legislation in the EU was built on the concept of the so-called "Five Freedoms"²¹ but fails to protect any of these freedoms in chickens kept for meat. See the table on the next page, which illustrates that chicken farms are allowed to operate in a severely welfare-compromising way, as the existing laws fall short of promoting significant advancements in animal welfare.²²

Table: The “Five Freedoms”

Freedom from hunger and thirst	<i>By ready access to fresh water and a diet to maintain full health and vigor.</i>	Broiler breeders are feed restricted, with water being restricted at times as well.
Freedom from discomfort	<i>By providing an appropriate environment including shelter and a comfortable resting area.</i>	Chickens are usually kept in high densities and in barren environments. Litter quality tends to be poor as it is usually not changed during a production cycle and soon becomes soiled with faecal material.
Freedom from pain, injury or disease	<i>By prevention or rapid diagnosis and treatment.</i>	Due to their rapid growth, the birds suffer from a plethora of health issues that cause long-term pain and suffering.
Freedom to express normal behavior	<i>By providing sufficient space, proper facilities and company of the animal's own kind.</i>	The environment of chicken farms is usually barren, not encouraging of activity, and the poor litter quality leads to inability to perform comfort behaviors, such as dustbathing. Due to the unnaturally rapid growth caused by human interventions, broilers' physical abilities are limited, which leads to lower engagement in natural behaviors, such as foraging. Some of the broiler breeders are kept in cages, which restrict their freedom of movement.
Freedom from fear and distress	<i>By ensuring conditions and treatment which avoid mental suffering.</i>	Legislation permits high stocking densities, leading to routine overcrowding, causing animals stress. This is amplified when no functional areas (e.g. elevated spaces) are provided, which are not legally required.



4. Recommendations for Policymakers

²³ European Food Safety Authority (2023). Welfare of broilers on farm. EFSA Journal, 21(2). ISSN 1831-4732. doi: 10.2903/j.efsa.2023.7788.

²⁴ Strategic Dialogue on the Future of EU Agriculture. A shared prospect for farming and food in Europe [online] [cit. 02.10.2024]. Retrieved from: https://agriculture.ec.europa.eu/common-agricultural-policy/cap-overview/main-initiatives-strategic-dialogue-future-eu-agriculture_en.

I. The Broiler Directive needs to be revised, as was envisaged by the Farm to Fork Strategy (2020), with its scope extended to include broiler breeders.

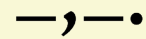
The revision must be based on the latest science, provided by the European Food Safety Authority in its scientific opinion from 2023.²³

- Growth rate should be limited to a maximum of 50 g/day, i.e., fast-growing breeds should not be kept as it is not possible to sustain good health and welfare for these animals.
- For breeders, feed restriction should be avoided by choosing appropriate breeds, which once again means the departure from selection focused on rapid growth
- Stocking density should not exceed 11 kg/m² to allow for better health, the expression of natural behaviors and proper rest.
- Chickens should be encouraged to be more active and engage in natural behaviors through environmental enrichment. This includes regular additions of new litter, as well as providing covered areas and elevated platforms.

II. The food system should encourage consumers to choose more plant-based proteins, recognizing both environmental and animal welfare footprint of intensive animal farming.

Steps to facilitate such a shift could include, among others:

- Adopting an EU-wide action plan for plant-based foods to strengthen the plant-based agri-food chains, as recommended by the Strategic Dialogue on the Future of EU Agriculture.²⁴
- Increased promotion of plant-based foods instead of welfare-compromising and polluting products, such as meat.
- Increased support for plant-based foods through public procurement, which could increase the consumption of plant-based proteins in public canteens.



The European Institute for Animal Law & Policy

ACHIEVING BETTER TREATMENT FOR ANIMALS

**Author:**

Gabriela Kubíková

Editors:

Ekaterina Solomina, Reagan Sova, Vienna Leigh

Published by:

The European Institute for Animal Law & Policy,
2024.

Acknowledgments:

Front page photo: © Lukáš Vincour / We Animals.
Executive summary photo: © Andrew Skowron / We
Animals. This page: © Itsuka Yakumo / We Animals



www.animallaweurope.org



[@AnimalLawEurope](https://twitter.com/AnimalLawEurope)



[Animal Law Europe](https://www.linkedin.com/company/AnimalLawEurope)



[@animallaweurope.bsky.social](https://bsky.app/profile/animallaweurope.bsky.social)



[Subscribe to the newsletter](#)