



# Exposing the secret suffering of chickens farmed for meat



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# 1. Executive summary

Behind chicken, the world's favourite meat, is a shocking and unacceptable cost that increases daily as global demand grows. Hidden from consumers, absent from restaurant menus and food labelling, is an appalling catalogue of suffering. It features the painful heart, skin, lung and bone problems and unimaginable stress suffered by industrially-farmed chickens forced to live in dismal conditions and grow as big as possible in the shortest possible time.

Sixty billion meat chickens – also known as broilers – are raised for global consumption each year. Around 40 billion chickens live in miserable, cramped and overcrowded conditions, typically going from hatchery to slaughter house in six weeks.

Fried, roasted, boiled, grilled, chopped, pureed and liquefied...chickens appear both obviously and invisibly in food. Alarming, few consumers of chicken meat are aware of such suffering. Their mass production is one of the biggest causes of animal suffering in the world.

Demand for chicken meat continues to rise, and without intervention to protect the chickens industrially farmed to meet this demand, their widespread suffering will rise exponentially too.

This report documents their unacceptable treatment. It includes first-hand accounts from our investigators who visited industrial farms in both European Union (EU) and



non-EU countries. On all farms visited – even those not breaching any laws – they found thousands of chickens in severe distress.

This report does not just document suffering. It contains solutions. The power to protect billions of animals ultimately lies firmly in the hands of those who can influence the shape of large-scale chicken meat production. These are global food retailers and policy makers (as well as the public who play a vital role in influencing decision makers).

If suppliers start to introduce our minimum criteria – achievable improvements – it can make a big difference, alleviating the suffering of billions of chickens and increasing consumer confidence in retailers too.

**We are challenging the food industry to work with us to improve the welfare of billions of chickens.**



# 2. Increasing global demand for more chicken

**"A chicken in every pot and a car in every garage."**

Herbert Hoover, President of the United States 1929-1933

Chicken is the world's favourite meat.

Around

**60 billion**

chickens are reared for their meat every year. This is compared to 1.5 billion pigs, half a billion sheep and 300 million cattle.<sup>1</sup>

Around

**2,000**

meat chickens are slaughtered every second.<sup>2</sup>

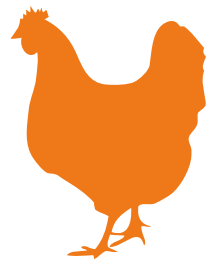
In 2013, global chicken production was estimated to be

**96.3 million**

tonnes.<sup>3</sup>



**44%**



of this amount was produced in the United States, China and Brazil.<sup>4</sup>



### How the world is eating chicken from 1996 - 2016.<sup>6</sup>

	Increase in chicken consumption per person between 1996-2016	Amount in kg
United States	↑ 22%	From 39.6kg to 48.5kg
Canada	↑ 26%	From 27.6kg to 34.8kg
European Union	↑ 38%	From 16.9kg to 23.3kg
China	↑ 89%	From 6.2kg to 11.7kg
India	↑ 183%	From 0.6kg to 1.7kg
Sub-Saharan Africa	↑ 85%	From 1.3kg to 2.4kg

As a global average, the amount of meat a person will eat annually is expected to increase by 1.3kg by 2025, reaching 35.3kg per person<sup>5</sup>. Chicken meat will make up most of this additional consumption.

## Farming industrially

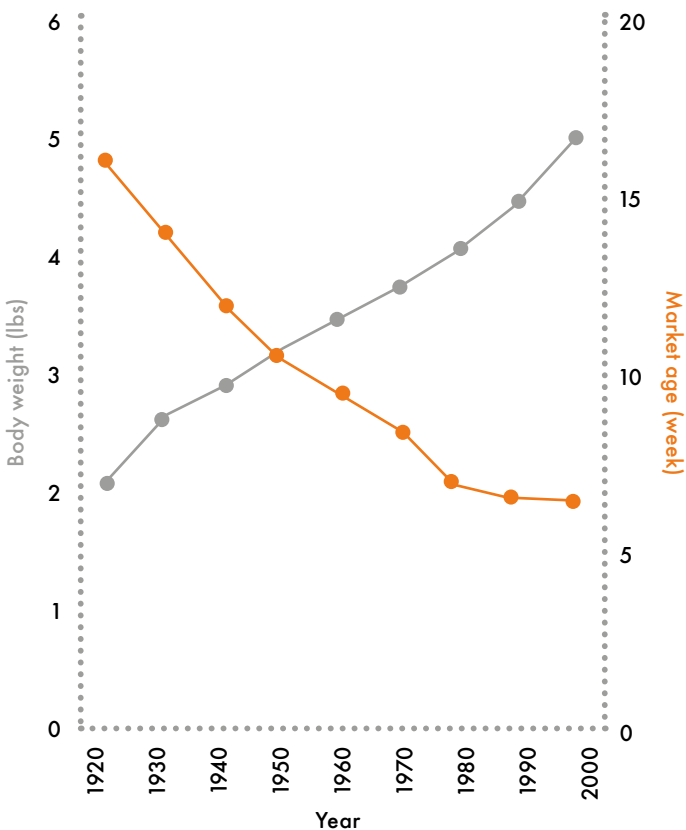
When US President Herbert Hoover talked in the early 1900s about his desire to get a 'chicken in every pot,' he may have been shocked how the story would play out. His world was one where smaller and free-range chicken farms were the norm, but by the mid-20th century the push for efficient production had started. Chickens were increasingly moved indoors, where farmers could control their diets and fit more animals into smaller spaces.

Today the chicken meat industry is racing to perfect the art of protein production. This means most chickens raised for meat have more room cooking in an oven than they ever did in their short and miserable lives.

Of the 60 billion chickens farmed every year, around 40 billion are farmed industrially. They are confined as chicks, in their tens of thousands, to heavily crowded sheds with little or no natural light. There are few opportunities to explore, perch, dustbathe, or do many of the things they would naturally do.

At slaughter weight a factory grown chicken lives in an area equivalent to an A4 piece of paper.

**Figure 1.1**  
Changes in average broiler age and weight at slaughter in the United States



## Breeding suffering

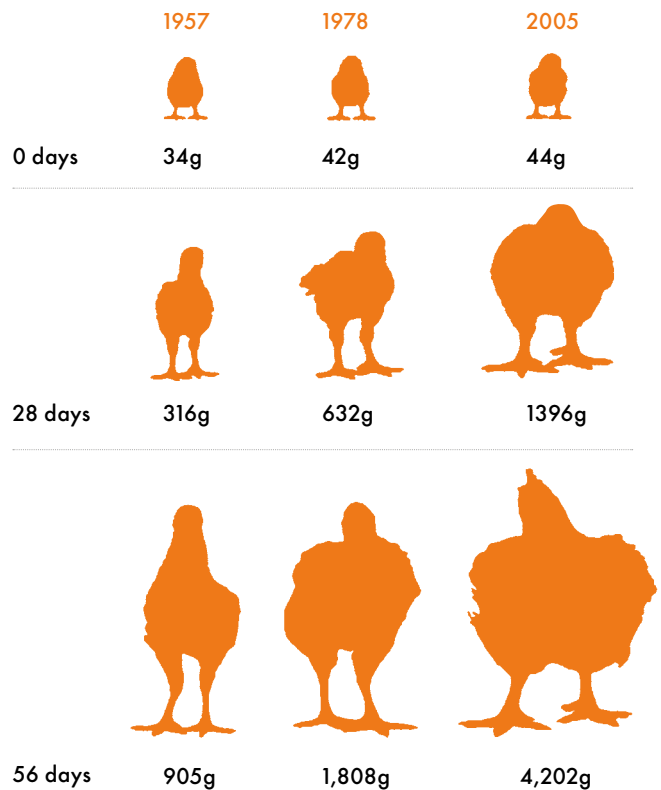
As farms are changing – becoming more and more industrialised to fuel the global demand for chicken – the animals are being forced to change too. More and more are genetically selected to produce more meat in less time.

Companies including Aviagen and Cobb have worked with producers to breed chickens capable of such rapid growth that they reach their slaughter weights in just six weeks – essentially while they're still immature. A slower-growing chicken reared on an industrial farm can be expected to reach its slaughter weight in eight to 12 weeks. This lower growth rate puts less of a strain on a chicken's body.

Figure 1.1 shows how the body weight of a typical chicken in the United States has increased many times during the last century. The age at which the animal is slaughtered has decreased substantially.

This extreme growth rate becomes more shocking when comparing the appearance of a chicken over time (figure 1.2).

**Figure 1.2**  
How meat chickens have changed<sup>7</sup>



Age-related changes in size of University of Alberta Meat Control strains unselected since 1957 and 1978 and Ross 308 broilers (2005). Within each strain, images are of same bird at 0, 28 and 56 days of age.





# 3. Racing to the bottom – the industrial chicken farm

Anyone asked to design the right environment to meet the needs of a chicken would probably design the opposite of an industrial chicken farm. Yet an estimated 40 billion chickens are raised in these systems every year.



## Focussing on chicken welfare problems

### Growing too quickly

The modern industrially-farmed meat chicken is the result of extreme genetic selection. Each chicken is expected to reach its slaughter weight in around six weeks – a weight it would naturally take around three months for chickens to reach. This rapid growth can cause severe health problems, such as painful lameness and strain to the animal's heart and lungs. As a result of these health problems and with little to do, factory farmed chickens spend much of their life sitting down. Many endure constant pain as a result of lameness.

### Overcrowding misery

An industrial chicken shed can hold tens of thousands of chickens. Most sheds are so densely packed that in the last week of a chicken's life, each bird lives in an area smaller than an A4 piece of paper. This makes it difficult for chickens to move around or behave naturally. Many are disturbed by other birds while trying to rest. Such severe overcrowding can cause lameness and painful skin diseases.

### Unnatural environments

Most industrial farming systems stop chickens behaving naturally. Although food and water is provided through

dispensers, there are few opportunities for birds to perch, forage, explore or dustbathe. With these natural activities denied, chickens suffer stress and physical problems like lameness and lesions on their skin.

### Living in poor litter

The lives of industrially-farmed chickens are made worse by the quality of loose material (litter) covering the floors of the sheds. Because of the high stocking densities, the litter can get wet and dirty with ammonia-rich chicken droppings. This prevents the birds from being able to scratch or dustbathe in the litter. It causes painful lesions on their feet, legs and breasts and releases harsh fumes that can cause lung and eye problems.

### Lighting matters

Most industrially-farmed chickens spend their whole lives in closed sheds without any natural light. Lights are left on for prolonged periods, often with only a short period of darkness. This means that chickens are unable to rest as they would naturally.



## Confined to cages: an even more extreme future for chickens?

Countries, including Turkey, Russia and China, use caged systems to farm chickens for their meat. These barren cages, which are not permitted in the European Union (EU), cause even more welfare problems than the crowded sheds typical of industrial farming.

This is because birds reared in cages are likely to be crammed even more closely together. Cage systems generally hold around 25 birds for every m<sup>2</sup>, but we have seen some cage manufacturers recommending more than 30 birds. This means that two chickens would potentially have

to share a floor space roughly equivalent in size to an A4 sheet of paper. At this density, in their last weeks of life, the birds are so overcrowded that they can barely move.

Despite these cages not being allowed in the EU, European companies such as Big Dutchman are still manufacturing cages for sale and promoting them in countries where they are permitted.

Because of the severe welfare problems they cause chickens, these farming systems have no place in the global chicken meat supply chain.





# 4. Exposing industrial farms

The intense suffering of chickens confined to caged systems and sheds on farms in southwestern and south-eastern Europe was uncovered by our investigators earlier this year.<sup>8</sup> They visited three cage farms. Each farm held between 75,000 – 80,000 birds with up to 130 birds in each cage. Our investigative team also filmed and documented conditions in farms where chickens were being reared in sheds.

What they found was harrowing. One of our most experienced investigators felt they had witnessed the worst examples of animal suffering in their whole career. Below are excerpts from their reports.

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## Investigation case study

### Confronting caged confinement

“All three cage farms to which we gained entry were claustrophobic, deafening and shocking in the suffering for which they were responsible. The barns overwhelmed us with the clamour of the massed and miserable birds, the artificial roaring of the vents and fans, and the horrendous, nausea-inducing smell of the chickens’ waste.

We filmed birds with red raw breasts and bottoms from sitting on the plastic flooring of their cages. Some were completely bald on the lower half of their bodies. We spoke to keepers claiming to visit the cages throughout the day and remove the dead. But we knew this couldn’t have been done very regularly given the number of swollen dead chickens we saw left in their cages. Some birds were forced to stand on black rotting carcasses.

The worst farm of the three was a 100-metre-long barn, flanked on either side by cages in three storeys. Each cage was dark and overcrowded with 90 chickens. We were

told around 50 to 60 birds died every day – more in the summer. A disease had already killed 9,000 out of 85,000 birds and more were dying.\*

Black carcasses littered the floor of this farm and the carcasses of dead birds hung inside and outside some cages. The manure conveyor belt had not been tended to for a very long time and was covered with the decaying dead.

One keeper at a cage farm told us that he had not been able to eat chicken since starting his job. It was just too painful to see them arrive as chicks and know what was in store for them. He told us that despite being unable to move, they still attempted to escape their hideous captivity.

All three cage farms were contracted to two large poultry producers. One was desperately trying to enter the EU market while the other claims on its website that its slaughterhouses comply with EU standards.”

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## Investigation case study

### Investigating industrial sheds

“We visited two types of farms – large and typically industrial, and smaller ones. Both were characterised by rows and rows of chickens reared for around 40 days, and then slaughtered.

Many of the chickens we saw were rapidly panting, their beaks open due to the heat. Some were lying on the ground, sometimes at an awkward angle with their feet stretched out. Because broiler chickens are bred to gain as much weight as possible in the shortest possible time they become heavy and unable to move around easily.





In the farms that were holding older birds the animals were so crowded together it was hard for them to move and disturbing for us as investigators to watch them. They were ungainly, and clearly struggling. All farms had some sick, dying or dead birds.

On a farm that was keeping 200,000 chickens, we filmed 32-day-old birds that were approaching their slaughter weight and had very little room to move. We couldn't understand how they could get to the food and water points. We were told that at around 30-days-old some were taken away to make room for the others who still had more days of growth left.

We also filmed 33,000 one-week-old chicks confined in a shed. Unlike the previous farm these birds had more room, as they were not fully grown, but this meant their suffering was more obvious. Many were breathing very heavily, and dead chicks littered the floor.”

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These investigations highlight the physical and psychological suffering that millions of chickens experience on farms around the world every day. Yet they are sentient creatures capable of experiencing empathy, pain and stress.

Global demand for chicken meat means food companies are often prioritising profit over animal welfare.

**“One dying chick in particular stuck in my mind. It was just lying on its back, belly up with its legs splayed out, taking short, sharp breaths and looking at the ceiling. I filmed it for several minutes. It seemed as if it had decided not to fight any more, all of its energy had just seeped away. I think it might be the saddest thing I’ve ever seen.”**

Investigator, World Animal Protection

## Setting standards against suffering

Steps have been taken to improve the lives of chickens around the world. This includes:

- legislation (such as the European Broiler Directive)
- codes of practice (such as the World Organisation for Animal Health (OIE) Terrestrial Animal Health Code)
- industry standards (such as those from Red Tractor in the UK or the National Chicken Council in the US). Standards have also been set by third-party schemes (such as RSPCA Assured, Beter Leven and Certified Humane), and by private companies.

Certain schemes, such as RSPCA Assured, offer genuine progress

for chicken welfare. Unfortunately, however, most fall well short of requiring the level of protection that chickens need. There are also inconsistencies in the enforcement of welfare standards.

Food retailers have not been subjected to sufficient consumer pressure to improve chicken welfare. This is because the problem is largely unseen and because consumers are understandably confused about the provenance of the food on their plates. Many food retailers also simply don't have necessary supply chain information to make informed decisions that could improve chicken welfare. That's why we're campaigning - to turn this situation around and give meat chickens the protection they deserve.

# 5. What we're asking for

The suffering described in this report and uncovered by our investigators is unacceptable and unnecessary, particularly when higher-welfare indoor systems are already available and in use. These higher-welfare systems let chickens behave like chickens. They provide a good balance of animal welfare benefits and commercial viability. This section highlights the key welfare requirements we would like to see.

## Growing slowly

**We want chickens to grow at a more natural rate. This means gaining less than 50g of weight per day on average.**

Chickens on higher-welfare indoor farms are allowed to grow at a slower, more natural rate. This reduces the strain on their hearts, lungs and legs. It means they can move around more easily and this reduces lameness and heart failure.





## Encouraging natural behaviour

**We want chicken housing to encourage their natural behaviours including pecking and perching.**

Higher-welfare farms include various forms of enrichment for the chickens. These are simple additions such as hay-bales and perches which encourage movement and natural behaviours. Chickens who are able to behave more naturally suffer less stress and also have fewer physical problems such as lameness and skin lesions.

## Lighting naturally

**We want chickens to be given six hours of continuous darkness every day (with dusk and dawn periods). They should have a minimum light intensity of 20lux. All new chicken sheds should provide chickens with natural light.**

Natural lighting is used for higher-welfare indoors farms. This is good for chickens and the workers who care for them too. Vision is a chicken's main sense and providing them with natural light encourages them to move around more and dark periods allow them to rest. This can help reduce the leg problems from which the birds often suffer.

## Making space

**We want chickens to be stocked at a maximum density of 30kg per m<sup>2</sup> (or equivalent density, taking the slaughter weight of the bird into account).**

Chickens kept in higher-welfare indoor systems have more space. This increases their comfort, reduces their stress and encourages them to move, scratch, peck and dustbathe.

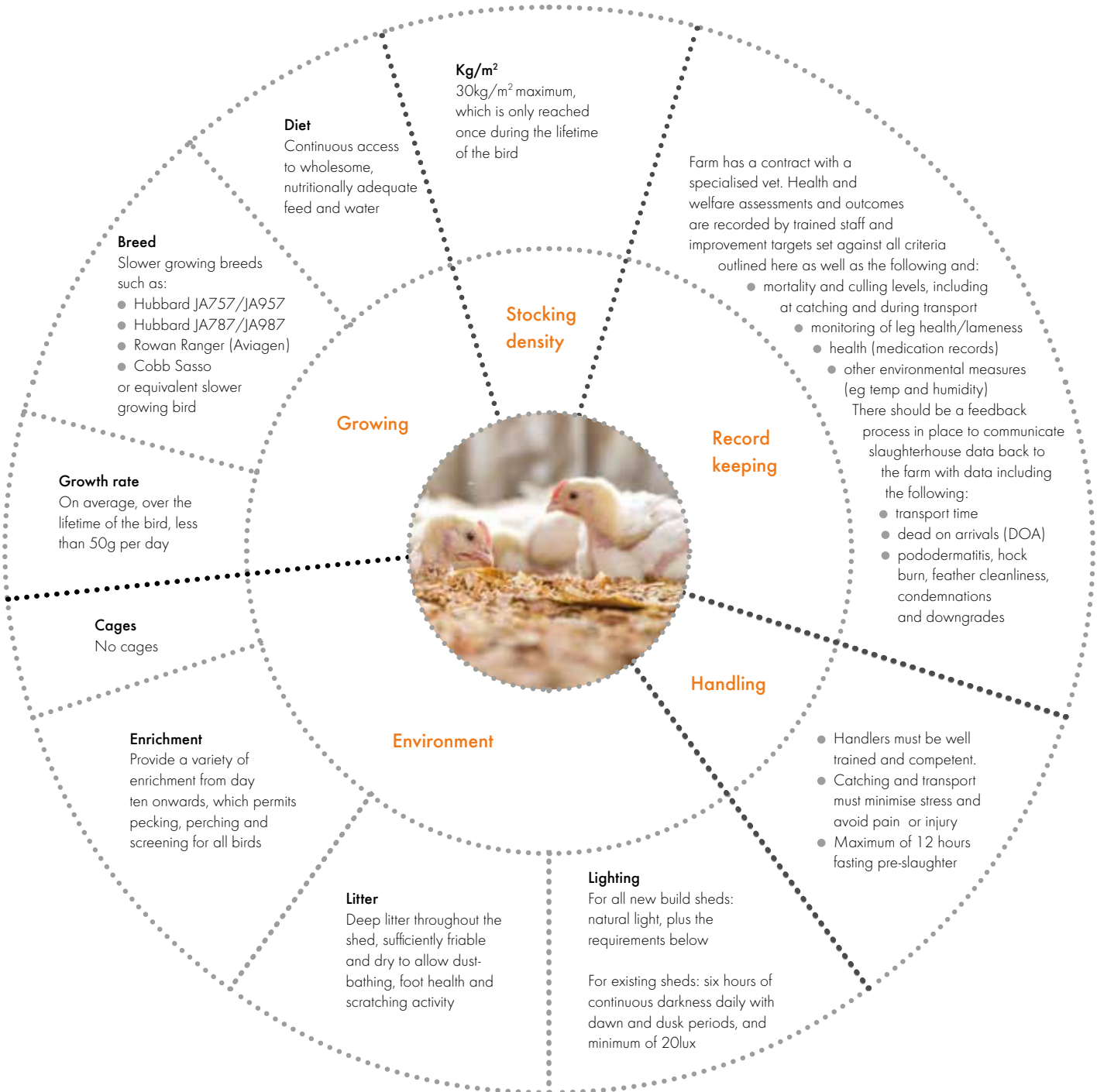
## Improving litter

**We want indoor-reared chickens to be provided with deep litter. It must be sufficiently loose and dry to allow dust-bathing and scratching, and promote good foot health.**

The litter the birds are reared on often gets wet and dirty on industrial farms, partly as a result of crowding. On farms with lower stocking densities and appropriate management, litter can remain dry and loose. This helps to reduce the occurrence of painful skin lesions on chickens' feet, legs and breasts and reduces respiratory and eye problems. Deep, good quality litter also allows chickens to rest in comfort and perform natural behaviours such as scratching, pecking and dustbathing.



# Our welfare criteria for meat chickens





## 6. Building a worldwide movement to protect meat chickens

People are key to improving farm animal welfare. By demanding higher-welfare food products, consumers can create better lives for farm animals around the world.

The strength of public opinion has already led to more egg-laying hens being reared in higher-welfare production systems. In the UK, production of cage-free eggs has increased from 31 per cent in 2003 to over 50 per cent at present.<sup>9</sup>

Such progress is largely due to consumers and governments calling for the introduction of a compulsory method of production labelling in the EU in 2004. In the USA, many international food retailers and brands have committed to sourcing cage-free eggs over the next few decades.

We believe it's possible to achieve change at the same scale for meat chickens.



# Support for chickens is growing worldwide

## North America

World Animal Protection, along with other animal-welfare groups, has led a successful campaign to persuade major food producers and retailers to move away from caged eggs. Significant interest is now building in the plight of chickens raised for meat.

Recent research by Deloitte<sup>10</sup> highlights how consumers put value on animal welfare. While consumers have historically made purchasing decisions based on taste, price and convenience, the research shows health and wellness, safety, social impact and transparency now play an important role for many people in the USA too.

## Europe

High-profile campaigns and consumer pressure led to the introduction of the EU Broiler Directive in May 2007. This details production standards for typical industrial farming systems.

Ninety-four per cent of the respondents to Eurobarometer - a formal EU survey - said they believe in the importance of protecting the welfare of farm animals. Eighty-two per cent said they believed farm animal welfare should be better protected than it is now. Fifty-nine per cent were prepared to pay more for products from higher-welfare farming systems.

## Asia Pacific

Higher-welfare farming benefits can be foreign as well as domestic. The large export markets of chicken meat from Asia to Europe and North America means that farming standards commonly need to match those of the importing countries or companies. The broiler industry in Thailand appears to have recognised that animal welfare could be an important selling point for parts of the export market.



## Latin America

Brazilian company Korin produces chicken meat and eggs to a successful and growing business model.<sup>11</sup> Korin's products were the first to achieve an animal-welfare certification in Brazil and are sold in 1,400 Brazilian food retail outlets, including Walmart and Pão de Açúcar. Chicken meat is Korin's rapidly growing main business, stimulated by the growing domestic Brazilian demand for humanely-produced chicken meat. In 1995 it produced 260,000 kg on its Ipeúna site; in 2011 this reached 9,000 tonnes.

Consumer and retailer research confirms there is a growing demand for products with higher welfare, and willingness to pay a premium. This is especially the case among the growing middle class and in large cities like São Paulo, where consumers are less sensitive to price and more interested in quality attributes, including animal welfare.<sup>12 13</sup>

## Africa

Poultry production in Africa is growing to meet rising demand for chicken meat. Alongside this, many African countries are experiencing rapid economic growth. The time is right to explore and promote higher welfare ways of producing chicken to food retailers and producers and engage consumers in creating demand for higher welfare chicken.

## Middle East

World Animal Protection is working with a number of farmers on pilot projects to develop better welfare conditions for chickens. We will continue to explore opportunities to prove the technical and business cases for higher-welfare chicken production here.

## Campaigning globally

We are campaigning globally to improve the lives of industrially-farmed chickens. Affecting billions of animals annually, this issue represents one of the world's biggest causes of animal suffering.

From our regional hubs in Africa, Asia Pacific, Europe, North America and Latin America, we are moving the world to protect animals.

## Raising the standard

World Animal Protection recognises that chicken is an important food choice in people's diets worldwide. We recognise that it will take time to move the world to higher-welfare farming systems, but we believe change is possible.

We want fast-food retailers to move away from industrially-farmed chicken to higher-welfare indoor systems. In these systems the chickens will grow at a slower, more natural rate. They will have more space and stimulus to keep them active and allow them to perform natural behaviours. And the sheds in which the chickens live will be naturally lit and more comfortable. We want these farms to become the new standard for chicken production across the globe.



## Harnessing the power of iconic brands

Global food retailers have the power and responsibility to drive change for chickens – after all the animals are responsible for their success. By 2020, we want corporates to commit to give better lives to 10 billion chickens. We are ready to work with as many retailers as we can to bring this about.

We want KFC, Nando's, McDonald's, Burger King, Pizza Hut, Domino's, Starbucks and Subway to commit to not using cages to rear chickens for the meat they sell on their menus. Some of these companies have already taken big steps to improve the lives of the animals in their care. They have committed to only using eggs produced by cage-free hens. We want to see the same commitment for meat chickens too.

As one of the largest fast-food brands in the world, we want KFC to be a global leader for industry and promise to improve the lives of its chickens through better welfare standards. This means letting them grow at a more natural rate and providing them with more space, light and enrichment.

We are already working with companies around the world, including Betagro (in Thailand) and BRF (in Brazil), using scientific evidence and best practice examples to put animal welfare at the heart of their businesses. We're ready to work with more.

## Creating change for chickens

Previous positive steps on animal welfare made by iconic food companies have catalysed change throughout the industry. The cage-free eggs movement is a good example of this, particularly across Europe and the United States. We will build on this momentum, harnessing the increasing public interest in health, transparency and animal welfare. We will galvanise global citizens to change the lives of billions of animals for the better.

If you are a consumer there are **five simple steps** you can take to create change for chickens.

- ❖ **Join our campaign** and find out more at [worldanimalprotection.org/change-for-chickens](http://worldanimalprotection.org/change-for-chickens)
- ❖ **Sign our petition** to challenge KFC – one of the largest chicken retailers in the world – to improve the lives of millions of factory farmed chickens.
- ❖ **Buy chicken products** that come from higher-welfare sources.
- ❖ **If you're eating out**, ask a member of staff where the chicken comes from.
- ❖ **Make a donation** to World Animal Protection to help our campaigners keep challenging global food retailers to give chickens better lives.



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\*Our investigators observed a biosecurity protocol when entering any farm. Field researchers confirmed to us that protective, disposable clothing was worn on all visits and all personnel, equipment and vehicles were disinfected on entering and leaving the premises. Our field researchers also confirmed that at least 48 hours were allowed between each farm visit. Furthermore, they confirmed to us that on discovering the disease outbreak on the cage farm, evidence gathering was stopped with immediate effect and a final extensive disinfection process was carried out. The field researchers in question did not visit any further farms as part of this work.

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