

Chickens Bred for Meat

Chickens bred for meat are the vast majority of our farmed land animals in Aotearoa. Three out of every four land animals killed per year are chickens bred for meat.¹

Key Issues

Unhealthy, fast-growing chickens

Since the 1950s, chickens bred for meat have been genetically selected to grow 'meat' at the detriment to their welfare. The age these birds are slaughtered has decreased, yet the size of the birds killed has increased.

The Cobb and Ross breeds currently used in New Zealand reach a slaughter weight of over 2kg at only 42 days old or even earlier. They can be killed at as young as four weeks old.

This abnormal growth rate puts huge stress on their bodies meaning that debilitating, painful lameness is common, and many chickens struggle to walk. They can be so top-heavy that they fall on their back and can't get up. The rapid growth puts huge stress on their organs. They can struggle to breathe and die from congestive heart failure within weeks of hatching.²

In a New Zealand study of chickens placed in sheds on farms for meat, more than one-third of the older birds suffered painful lameness and 2.65 per cent - which is around 6,000 per day according to the NZ poultry industry's own figures - died or were culled prematurely due to health problems.³

Housing and environment

The legal minimum standard for stocking density (space per bird) is 38kg of chickens per m², with a recommended best practice of 30kg/m².⁴

In practice, throughout the six weeks as the birds rapidly grow, stocking density can be between 13 - 19 birds per square metre - often less space than an A4 sheet of paper per chicken. Each shed has tens of thousands of birds. There is nothing for the chickens to do other than exist to eat and drink. New litter for the floor is only brought in before each batch of day-old chicks is placed in the sheds. The same litter remains throughout the six weeks the birds are grown. With no perches to sit on, the chickens are forced to live in their own excrement. Ammonia in the litter can cause breathing problems and chemical burns to their legs and bodies.⁵

¹ Figure NZ (2021). *Meat Chickens Processed in New Zealand* <https://figure.nz/chart/QzXp9lsqAJr9v1x>

² Zhang, Schmidt, & Lamont, (2018). *Distinct genes and pathways associated with transcriptome differences in early cardiac development between fast- and slow-growing broilers*. PLoS ONE, 13:12, e0207715.

³ Webster, J., Cameron, C. and Rogers, A. (2013). *Survey of Lameness in New Zealand Meat Chickens* MPI Technical Paper No: 2013/45. MPI.

⁴ MPI (2018). *Code of Welfare (Meat Chickens)*.

⁵ Nicol, Bouwsema, Caplen, Davies, Hockenhull, Lambton, Lines, Mullan, & Weeks. (2017). *Farmed Bird Welfare Science Review*. Department of Economic Development, Jobs, Transport and Resources, Melbourne, Victoria.

Parent Birds

Thousands of parent birds are kept alive for about 15 months to fertilise and lay eggs repeatedly on breeder farms. These parent birds, like their chicks, are selectively bred to grow abnormally fast. To limit their lameness and other health problems and allow them to survive to sexual maturity, their food is heavily restricted. This means these chickens are constantly hungry, adding to their stress. and the stress also increases the number of injuries due to repeated mating.⁶ These breeder farms are exempt from the Code of Welfare for Meat Chickens, rendering them unregulated.

Misleading labelling

The chicken meat industry attempts to create a market advantage by selling its meat as cage-free and hormone-free. However, cage-free is standard across the industry and hormone use is prohibited in NZ. This misleading labelling was the subject of a [ConsumerNZ 'Bad Taste' award](#) in 2019.

While hormones are not used, many chickens bred for meat are routinely fed antibiotics, These are used to reduce the risk of disease outbreaks caused by the poor conditions they are kept in and reduce some of the health problems suffered by the unhealthy breeds used.

Some chicken meat in NZ is also labelled as free-range. While caring consumers are paying a premium for free-range chicken meat, the free-range standards written by the chicken industry itself mean very little improvement for the birds. The same unnaturally fast-growing breeds are used as on fully indoor farms. These unnatural breeds can struggle to walk as far as the so-called 'pop holes' in the shed walls giving potential access to the outdoors, especially when they are crowded in with up to 36,000 other chickens in each shed⁷.

Animals Aotearoa has produced a [guide to chicken meat labelling](#).

Better Chicken Commitment

The [Better Chicken Commitment](#) (BCC) is a set of science-based, improved standards for chickens bred for meat. Overseas campaigns have seen successful changes for chickens, with nearly 600 commitments to the BCC. These standards have been created and agreed on by animal charities around the world as the minimum welfare needed for chickens bred for meat, and have been [adapted for a New Zealand context](#) by Animals Aotearoa and other advocacy organisations.

Six food businesses, so far have signed up to the BCC - Domino's, My Food Bag, HelloFresh, SwoleFoods, The Coffee Club and Bird on a Wire.

Healthier breeds

Using breeds with a more natural growth rate allows the chickens to support the increase in body weight and develop greater leg strength and health.⁸ There are healthier breeds that are already being used commercially overseas, and there is good evidence to show that they have much better welfare outcomes.⁹

⁶ As above, at 5.

⁷ Consumer NZ. (2019). *Free-range claims*.
<https://www.consumer.org.nz/articles/free-range-claims/know-the-issue>

⁸ Hartcher & Lum. (2020). *Genetic selection of broilers and welfare consequences: a review*. *World's Poultry Science Journal*, 76:1, 154-167.

⁹ RSPCA (2017). *RSPCA Broiler Breed Welfare Assessment Protocol: To determine the welfare of broiler breeds*.

More space

In line with the government's recommended best practice, the BCC requires chickens to be sourced from farms with a maximum stocking density of 30 kg/m². When birds have more space, they are more active which is better for their health. Fewer birds in a shed also produce less excrement, which is better for air and litter quality.¹⁰

Enriched environment

The BCC requires farms to provide perches and items for chickens to peck and scratch at such as straw bales. With more space and perches, chickens have better limb health, can move around more easily, and spend time off the litter, leading to less incidence of ammonia burns.¹¹

Natural light and light levels of at least 50 lux (the level at which you can read the paper) during the day, and six hours of darkness (four hours continuous) are also required.

These light and air quality improvements are not just better for the chickens' welfare, they are also more favourable working conditions for the people who have to walk through the sheds to monitor the chickens, remove the dead bodies and cull the sick birds.

Alternative slaughter method used

At slaughterhouses, birds are hung upside down before passing them through an electrified water bath to stun them unconscious and a tank of scalding hot water, to remove their feathers. This method fails to stun some birds effectively, meaning some chickens have their necks cut while conscious and others pass through the scalding tank alive.¹²

The BCC requires slaughterhouses to use alternative stunning methods. Controlled atmospheric stunning (CAS) is a gas stunning method that does not require handling or hanging the birds upside down. Effective electrical stunning that does not require the birds to be hung upside down would also reduce the fail rate and stress on the birds. CAS is already mentioned in the Commercial Slaughter and Meat Chicken Codes of Welfare as an acceptable way to kill chickens.

Animals Aotearoa

Founded in 2021, Animals Aotearoa is an animal advocacy organisation set up primarily to focus on achieving welfare improvements for chickens. We are a part of the [Open Wing Alliance](#), a global coalition of over 90 member organisations – all working to improve the lives of chickens. We are working with food businesses to achieve significant changes to make sure chickens are of a healthier breed, are given more space per bird and environmental enrichments.

More information

www.animalsaotearoa.org/learn/about-chickens-bred-for-meat

Contact us - media@animalsaotearoa.org

¹⁰ As above, at 5.

¹¹ As above, at 5.

¹² As above, at 5.