

Media Brief: Chickens Bred for Meat in Aotearoa

The Scale

Chickens bred for meat—called broilers by the industry—make up most of the land animals farmed and killed in Aotearoa. Approximately 120 million are slaughtered annually for meat.¹

The Key Issues

Genetically Selected for Rapid Growth

The Cobb and Ross breeds currently used throughout the New Zealand chicken meat industry are bred to reach over 2kg in just 42 days, or even sooner. 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 **suffer respiratory problems and die from congestive heart failure within weeks of hatching**.²

A New Zealand study found more than a third of older chickens in meat sheds had painful mobility issues.³ According to NZ industry figures, around **6,000 birds die or are culled daily on farms** due to health problems.

Cramped, Barren Environments

Legally, chickens can be stocked at up to **38kg per square metre**⁴, as little as an A4 sheet of space per bird. Tens of thousands are confined in each single shed with no enrichment or perches (unless on SPCA Certified farms). The litter isn't removed throughout their lives, so these birds stand and lie in their own waste, which causes ammonia burns and respiratory issues.⁵

Parent Birds - Chronically Hungry

Parent birds, kept alive to breed, suffer from the same unnatural growth traits. To keep them alive long enough to reproduce, their feed is severely restricted, leaving them perpetually hungry and stressed.⁶ These parent birds are exempt from welfare codes.

Misleading Labels

¹ Figure NZ (2024). *Meat Chickens Processed in New Zealand* <https://figure.nz/chart/QzXp9lsqIAJr9v1x>

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.

⁶ As above, at 5.

Chicken meat marketed as “cage free” or “hormone free” gives a false impression—meat chickens are never caged, and hormone use is prohibited. While caring consumers pay a premium for “free-range” chicken, the same unnaturally fast-growing breeds are used as the rest of the chicken production. Many birds never make it outside due to severe lameness and being crowded in with tens of thousands of other chickens in each shed.

A 2023 Horizon Research poll showed most New Zealand consumers are misled by these claims, unintentionally supporting low-welfare farming.⁷ Animals Aotearoa has created a labelling guide to help consumers make informed choices.⁸

A Better Way: The Better Chicken Commitment

The **Better Chicken Commitment**⁹ (BCC) sets science-based minimum welfare standards for chickens reared for meat. Over **600 food companies worldwide** have adopted it—eight in New Zealand, so far: Domino’s, My Food Bag, HelloFresh, The Coffee Club, Bird On A Wire, Columbus Coffee and Mexico.

Key Improvements under the BCC:

- **Breeds that grow at a more natural rate:** Healthier birds with fewer mobility and organ issues.
- **Lower stocking density:** No more than 30kg/m², in line with government best practice.
- **Environmental Enrichment:** Perches, objects to interact with such as straw bales, and natural light, support better physical and mental health.
- **Improved slaughter method:** Requires an end to waterbath stunning with live shackling, that causes pain and stress, and fails to stun a proportion of chickens.
- **Annual public reporting** by companies to show progress made towards full BCC compliance.

Who We Are

Animals Aotearoa, founded in 2021, is a charity working to improve chicken welfare through food industry reform. We are part of the **Open Wing Alliance**, a global coalition of over 90 organisations committed to ending cruelty in chicken farming.



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



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⁷ <https://animalsaotearoa.org/take-action/end-humanewashing/>

⁸ Chicken Meat Labels. What do they really mean? Animals Aotearoa.

https://drive.google.com/file/d/1uN0D77_3NC_I1zANrlzHJl8PmyAc1evP/view?usp=sharing

⁹ <https://www.animalsaotearoa.org/new-zealand-chicken-commitment.html>