



# Layer hens

## RSPCA APPROVED FARMING SCHEME STANDARDS

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**RSPCA** 



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*Cover photo by Desmond Wong.*

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# Overview

## Introduction

RSPCA Australia seeks to ensure high animal welfare standards on farm, during transport and at slaughter through its RSPCA Approved Farming Scheme.

The RSPCA Approved Farming Scheme's animal welfare standards for layer hens (the Standards) are designed to assist the industry to continually improve and demonstrate high animal welfare outcomes for egg production.

RSPCA Australia believes that the adoption of these Standards will improve the welfare of chicks and hens through the application of production practices that will meet their behavioural and physiological needs.

RSPCA Australia recognises that industry already addresses issues associated with food safety, livestock traceability, occupational health and safety, and environment through a variety of quality assurance (QA) programs, thus these Standards are expected to be integrated with existing industry and/or retail QA programs and practices.

These Standards are based upon RSPCA policy, available scientific research, current legislation applied in Australia, codes of practice and standards and guidelines for animal welfare, veterinary and technical advice and current industry good practice.

## Principles underpinning the RSPCA Approved Farming Scheme Standards

The Standards are based on the 'Five Freedoms':

- Freedom from hunger and thirst: by ready access to fresh water and a diet to maintain full health and vigour.
- Freedom from discomfort: by providing an appropriate environment including shelter and a comfortable resting area.
- Freedom from pain, injury or disease: by prevention, rapid diagnosis and treatment.
- Freedom to express normal behaviour: by providing sufficient space, proper facilities and company of the animal's own kind.
- Freedom from fear and distress: by ensuring conditions and treatment which avoid mental suffering.

Although these 'freedoms' define ideal states, they provide a comprehensive framework for the assessment of animal welfare on farm, during transport and for slaughter. These 'freedoms' provide the framework for the standards in this scheme, presented as follows:

- food and water
- environment, housing and accommodation
- animal health and husbandry (including surgical procedures)
- management
- transport
- slaughter.

RSPCA Australia considers that these 'freedoms' will be better provided for if those responsible for the care of birds provide:

- caring and responsible planning and management
- skilled, knowledgeable and conscientious husbandry staff
- appropriate environmental design
- considerate handling and transport
- humane slaughter.

## Overview

## Scope

These Standards apply to layer hens kept for egg production in eligible systems in Australia.

**Note:** RSPCA Australia is investigating the feasibility of formally approving hatcheries, rearing facilities, pick-up crews and transporters that have arrangements with Approved Producers.

## Eligibility

Products that are eligible for approval under the RSPCA Approved Farming Scheme must be derived from layer hens housed in non-cage systems which meet the provisions of these Standards.

Definitions of eligible housing systems under the scheme include:

- Indoor systems where hens are free to roam within a shed which meets the specifications of these Standards.
- Outdoor systems where hens are housed in sheds, but have, by choice, access to a range or outdoor area that meet the specifications of these Standards.

Egg production systems where hens are housed in cages are not eligible for the RSPCA Approved Farming Scheme.

In addition to meeting the RSPCA Standards, producers/licensees are responsible for ensuring that the housing system meets the labelling (production descriptor) requirements of the industry and/or retailer (whichever is appropriate).

RSPCA Australia has discretion to determine the suitability or eligibility of the housing system as applicable within the context of the Scheme.

## Application

The documentation that supports the RSPCA Approved Farming Scheme consists of:

- *Operations Manual* - details the operation of the Scheme for both Approved Producers and Licensees, including the application process and the Assessment procedures.
- *Standards* (specific to each species) - provide the requirements for the rearing, handling, transport and/or slaughter of the species.
- *Templates* - for assessment and reporting.

It is expected that producers are aware of and comply with animal welfare and other requirements in all State/Territory legislation relevant to the farming enterprise including but not limited to transportation, processing, land use, environmental sustainability, food safety and consumer labelling.

These Standards do not necessarily repeat all the animal welfare provisions in the relevant model codes or standards for animal welfare. At the very minimum, compliance is expected with the latest edition of the:

- *Australian Model Code of Practice for the Welfare of Animals—Poultry* (or equivalent Australian Standard or State code where one exists).
- *Australian Animal Welfare Standards and Guidelines for the Land Transport of Livestock*.
- *Australian Model Code of Practice for the Welfare of Animals—Livestock at Slaughtering Establishments* (or equivalent Australian Standard or State code where one exists).

RSPCA Australia has discretion to request a producer to demonstrate compliance with legislative and regulatory requirements through the provision of documentation from the relevant local council, state/territory government, quality assurance program or other appropriate body.

## Requirements of the RSPCA Approved Farming Scheme

Specific requirements of the Scheme are detailed in the *Operations Manual*.

It is a requirement of the RSPCA Approved Farming Scheme that the following are completed:

- The Pre-Approval Self Assessment Report.
- The Animal Care Statement, the Veterinary Health Plan and other documents as relevant that specify management and standard operating procedures.
- Records to support production activities as indicated in the *Operations Manual*.

**Note:** Existing QA manuals for other programs or accreditation schemes and/or existing standard operating procedures, HACCP tables or records may be utilised to meet the requirements of these Standards, provided the specific provisions and targets in these Standards are demonstrated. Equivalence, on this basis, is determined by RSPCA Australia.

It is a requirement of the RSPCA Approved Farming Scheme that each enterprise nominate a dedicated person who has:

- Responsibility and accountability for the operation of the unit.
- Responsibility for overseeing the management and application of the requirements of the scheme.

# The Standards

## 1 Sourcing and management of chicks

**Note:** Chicks should be sourced from hatcheries that operate in accordance with the animal welfare requirements in the *Model Code of Practice for the Welfare of Animals—Domestic Poultry* and the relevant breed standards. RSPCA Australia may request to visit the hatchery from which chicks are sourced to ensure that these facilities operate according to procedures that aim to reduce the risk to bird welfare. RSPCA Australia is investigating the feasibility of formally approving hatcheries that have arrangements or contracts with Approved Producers.

### Hatchery\*

- 1.1 Hatcheries should be managed at the very minimum in accordance with the animal welfare requirements in the *Model Code of Practice for the Welfare of Animals—Domestic Poultry* and the relevant breed standards.
- 1.2 All hatchery staff should understand and apply the content of the animal welfare requirements in the *Model Code of Practice for the Welfare of Animals—Domestic Poultry* and the relevant breed standards.
- 1.3 Beak trimming must not be performed routinely. Where beak trimming is considered necessary, it must be performed by a competent operator using an infrared technique (see section 5.8 - 5.14).

### Transport from the hatchery or rearing facility

- 1.4 Transportation from the hatchery or rearing facility must be in accordance with the *Australian Standards and Guidelines for the Welfare of Animals—Land Transport of Livestock*.
- 1.5 The scheduling and management of chicks/pullets during transport should be designed to minimise risk to their welfare. This includes ensuring that:
  - Transport is scheduled in accordance with permitted times off feed and water.
  - Transport is avoided during extreme temperatures, where this is not managed by environmentally controlled vehicles.
- 1.6 Temperature during transport of chicks/pullets must be monitored and kept within targets (25–35°C for chicks and 10–30°C for pullets) and action taken where targets are exceeded to prevent chicks/pullets being pre-disposed to heat or cold stress.

### Bird placement and rearing<sup>1</sup>

**Note:** The following Standards for bird rearing apply where rearing is undertaken by the producer approved for the laying period. RSPCA Australia is investigating the feasibility of formally approving rearing facilities that have arrangements or contracts with Approved Producers.

### Bird placement

- 1.7 All chicks must be placed within their new housing facilities as soon as possible after arrival.

\* Indicates an amendment to the May 2009 version of these standards.

<sup>1</sup> Bird age, as defined in these standards, ranges from 0–6 weeks for chicks, 6–20 weeks for pullets, and 20 weeks or more for hens.

- 1.8\* The number of chicks delivered by the hatchery must be recorded.
- 1.9\* Mortalities (“dead-on-arrivals”) must be recorded and reported to the hatchery.
- 1.10 The shed must be appropriately prepared prior to the arrival of the chicks. Preparation activities include:
- flushing of water lines
  - checking water and feed availability and quality
  - cleaning and sanitation
  - litter provision
  - appropriate temperature and ventilation settings.
- 1.11\* Chicks must be observed at least four times on the day of placement to ensure that their appearance, vocalisations and behaviour are normal.
- 1.12 Chicks should not huddle (from being cold) or appear slow and listless (from being hot). Signs to check for include panting, spreading wings or exhibiting gular flutter. If these signs are observed, action must be taken to adjust temperature for the chicks. Any other abnormal behaviours should be identified and action taken accordingly.

### Bird rearing

- 1.13 Chicks and pullets should be reared in circumstances designed to develop natural behaviour for their adult life, which includes access to perching areas and litter. Birds should be reared in similar conditions to the layer facility to help them adjust easily to the laying environment.
- Where litter rearing is used and enteric infection or vaccination efficacy is an ongoing problem, chicks/pullets may be reared on wire for a maximum of 4 weeks after placement and then transferred to litter.
  - Where chicks/pullets are reared on wire, temporary supportive flooring material, such as paper or matting, must be provided during the early brooding period.
  - Where chicks/pullets are reared on wire, measures must be taken to ensure that the rearing environment is managed to eliminate the risk of disease.
- 1.14 Chicks/pullets should continue to gain weight, or at least maintain their bodyweight immediately after placement. Producers should refer to the relevant breed standards for guidance on specific growth rate targets.
- 1.15 Feed and watering facilities must be well spaced within the shed to enable easy access by birds.
- 1.16 Following the day of placement, chicks/pullets must be inspected at least twice every 24 hours to ensure that their appearance, vocalisations and behaviour are normal.
- 1.17 Throughout the rearing period, bird behaviour must be monitored and action taken to adjust the shed temperature, ventilation or lighting regime accordingly. Producers should refer to the relevant breed standards for guidance on specific targets relating to the rearing environment.
- 1.18\* Chicks reared away from the hen require a light intensity of about 20 lux on the feeders and drinkers for the first three days after hatching in order to learn to find food and water. This may then be reduced to as low as 10 lux during rearing without any detrimental effects to welfare, however chicks must still be able to see in order to find facilities (feed, water, perching areas) during the rearing period. Sudden increases in light should be avoided as it may cause flight reactions on some strains of birds.

## Sourcing and management of chicks

- 1.19 Pullets should be transferred to laying houses in good time before point of lay.
- The move from the grower to the layer facility should be handled with care.
  - After transfer the pullets should be dispersed evenly and placed close to feeders and drinkers (see section 2).
  - Water and feed must be available immediately.
  - Lighting must be left on long enough for the birds to find their way around.
- 1.20 A short period of training may be required to ensure pullets are aware of the resources in the shed (see section 3.14). Training generally involves moving the birds around so that they explore the shed, collecting floor eggs to reduce floor laying, encouraging the use of nest boxes and perches and adjusting lighting and feeding regimes as birds grow.

## Introduction to outdoor range areas

**Note:** RSPCA Standards do not require that hens have access to an outdoor range area. However where a range area is provided, the following additional Standard must be met.

- 1.21 Pullets must be introduced to outdoor range areas as soon as they are reasonably feathered. Care should be taken to closely observe birds, particularly their body condition, during introduction to range areas. See section 3.29 - 3.38.

## 2 Food and water

- 2.1 Feeding and watering equipment design, position and height must allow all birds to access feed and water with minimal effort and using normal posture.
- 2.2 All feeding and watering systems and equipment must be checked for efficient operation at least once each day to ensure all birds have access to feed and water.

### Feed and feeding equipment

- 2.3 Feed must provide nutrients that meet the requirements of the birds at each stage of production. The provision of grit is recommended.
- Should any poultry feed on the farm require testing, results must be made available to RSPCA Australia upon request.
- 2.4 Birds must have unrestricted access to food, with the exception of birds being treated under veterinary advice or birds being prepared for pick-up (see section 9.1).
- 2.5 Feed distribution must ensure that a uniform feed supply is available within the shed or outside range and is accessible to all birds.
- 2.6 Feed must be delivered at least daily to feeders and birds should be observed to be eating.

### Water and watering equipment

- 2.7 Water that is clean, safe and suitable for birds, must always be available in sufficient quantity.
- 2.8 Each bird must be able to easily access watering points without undue competition.
- Producers should consult equipment manufacturer and breed specifications for guidance on specific targets relating to the birds per drinker ratio. This ratio must be adjusted in areas subject to high temperature and humidity (see section 3.10 - 3.11).
- 2.9 Birds must be observed to be drinking. If drinking is insufficient, excessive or otherwise, action must be taken to investigate the cause(s).
- Observations of the shed will assist in determining if excessive water consumption is occurring or there is competition for drinkers resulting in water splash and wet litter.
  - Observations of the watering line will assist in determining if excessive water usage is due to leakage.
  - If there are adequate watering points and hens are not drinking, water quality may be suspect. Testing of water supply/source must be carried out accordingly.
  - Investigations to determine other possible causes must also be carried out.
- 2.10 Should water supply on the farm require testing, results must be made available to RSPCA Australia upon request.

### 3 Environment, housing and accommodation

- 3.1 All floors, surfaces, fittings and equipment in and around sheds must be designed, constructed and maintained to minimise the risk of injury or disease in birds, and to facilitate cleaning regimes (see section 7).
- 3.2 Housing design and stocking density must allow sufficient space for exercise, exploration and social behaviour (see section 4). Provision of environmental enrichment devices is encouraged.
- 3.3 The shed and range areas must be free of any items or objects that could injure birds.

#### Barn/shed facilities

- 3.4\* Facilities must be constructed, maintained and operated to discourage and restrict the entry of wild birds, rodents, predators and other pests that could cause distress or transmit diseases to birds. Aspects to consider include:
- The presence of dams and streams which may increase the on-farm biosecurity risk due to their attractiveness to wild birds.
  - The provision of feed and water indoors (where birds have access to a range area) to avoid attracting pests.
- 3.5 The principal consideration in planning the layout of the equipment in the shed must be accessibility and ease of use by the birds, particularly in terms of the feeding, drinking and nesting space. Difficulties in access or use will lead to restrictions in feed and water, causing loss of production, and difficulties in using nest space will result in a lowered percentage of laid eggs being harvested. Important aspects to consider for all buildings are:
- Are the equipment and birds spaced evenly throughout the shed?
  - Is the equipment adjustable to meet the needs of the birds?
  - Does the shed design allow easy observation of all birds?
- 3.6 Where present, alarms and other controls for ventilation, heating and cooling must be fully operational and maintained as required. Alarms must be checked regularly to ensure they are working. Personnel should be available to respond to alarms at all times.
- 3.7 Pest control programs must use the most humane effective techniques available.
- 3.8 There must be contingencies in place in the event of mechanical failure (i.e. temperature and ventilation controls), extreme temperatures, break down (feeding equipment), fire, or delays in delivery of farm inputs.
- Contingency planning should also include fires, floods and other natural disasters.
- 3.9 Overall shed conditions, including temperature, ventilation, facilities and lighting must be observed daily and adjusted to optimise bird welfare. A record of maintenance/repairs must be maintained.

#### Temperature and humidity

- 3.10\* Daily records of indoor minimum and maximum temperature must be maintained. It is recommended that daily records of relative humidity also be kept.

- 3.11 Shed temperatures should meet recommended targets for hens at all stages of production. Where extremes of temperature and humidity cause deviation from targets, action must be taken as far as practicable and as soon as possible to minimise impact on birds.

#### Flooring\*

- 3.12 Where all or part of the shed consists of raised flooring, e.g. plastic slats or wire-mesh floors,
- the gaps between the slats must not exceed 25mm
  - the design should be such that it provides adequate support for the birds and minimises the risk of damage to birds' feet or entrapment of birds (see 5.4).
  - manure build-up must not protrude through the floor.

#### Litter

- 3.13 Where hens are housed without access to an outdoor range area (see section 3.29 - 3.38), litter of an appropriate material (e.g. rice hulls or wood shavings) must be provided to a minimum average depth of 100mm, to allow hens to dust bathe and forage.
- 3.14\* Provision of litter must allow at least 35% of the flock to forage or dust bathe at any one time or measure at least one-third of the usable area of the shed (see 4.3).
- Access to the litter may be restricted for a maximum period of four weeks during the training period immediately following bird placement (see section 1.20).
- 3.15\* Litter must be of good quality, clean and mould-free and maintained in a dry and friable condition. Consideration must be given to the management of temperature, ventilation and humidity and consequent effects on litter condition.
- Wet areas around the drinkers should be avoided.
  - Careful monitoring of ventilation should occur when using foggers.
  - The bird's feathers should appear clean and dry.
  - Where areas of litter are becoming wet or crusted, immediate measures must be taken to prevent further deterioration and return litter to a dry and friable condition.
- 3.16 Litter must be replaced as required to enable birds to carry out foraging and dust bathing activities.
- 3.17 Where litter is tested for residues, results must be made available to RSPCA Australia upon request.

#### Ventilation

- 3.18 Natural or mechanical ventilation systems<sup>2</sup> must be operational and effective to provide adequate air exchange for the age and number of birds. Adequate air exchange is essential for managing heat, moisture, dust, and harmful gases.
- If ammonia exceeds 15ppm at bird height, appropriate diagnostic and corrective action must be taken (ammonia can normally be smelled at 10-15ppm by humans).
  - Dust levels must be managed to avoid negative impacts on bird welfare.

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<sup>2</sup> Natural ventilation systems rely on natural airflow to manage air exchange. Mechanical ventilation systems rely on extraction fans to manage air exchange. Stirring fans may be used in each system to assist with air movement within the shed.

## Lighting

- 3.19 The lighting system in the shed must provide a minimum period of 8 hours continuous artificial lighting per day (unless hens have access to daylight) and a minimum period of 8 hours continuous darkness (to be provided at night to ensure full darkness) in every 24-hour period (see section 1.17 for birds in the rearing period).
- 3.20\* The light levels in the shed (measured at bird head height) must be sufficient to allow birds to see without difficulty and to be properly inspected and any problems identified. In each 24-hour period, and outside the 8-hour dark period,
- the average lighting level in the shed must be no less than 10 lux (see section 1.18 for birds in the rearing period).
- 3.21 Lighting may be used to encourage hens to areas of the shed (i.e. nest boxes/perching areas), however lighting should be kept as uniform as possible throughout the shed.

## Perching areas

- 3.22 The provision of perching areas is required to ensure that hens can roost (perch above ground level) as necessary. Perches can be provided as linear perches or as perches incorporated within or onto raised floors. Raised floor areas (e.g. wire mesh or slatted plastic) on their own, do not qualify as perching area.
- 3.23 Where linear perches are provided these must:
- Be constructed of non-slip material.
  - Allow at least 15cm space per bird, with at least 30cm between the perches.
  - Have a top surface of approximately 4cm width.
  - Be at least 0.5m from the ground and positioned to minimise fouling of any hens below.
- 3.24\* Where linear perches are not provided there must be sufficient perching space in the form of perches incorporated within or onto raised floors. These must:
- Be constructed of non-slip material.
  - Allow at least 15cm space per bird, with at least 30cm between the perches.
  - Have a top surface of approximately 4cm width.
- 3.25 Linear perches and perches incorporated within raised floor areas must not contain sharp protrusions and be kept in good working order.
- 3.26 Perches and raised floor areas should be cleaned as part of the all-in all-out shed cleaning regime (see section 7).

## Nest boxes

- 3.27 Hens must be provided with sufficient nest boxes for all hens to be able to lay their eggs in a nest. There must be a minimum of one single nest for every 7 hens or 1m<sup>2</sup> nest boxes for every 120 hens. Nest boxes must be positioned away from the flock and be designed to encourage nesting behaviour.
- 3.28 Nest boxes must be kept clean and operational. Nesting material needs to be regularly changed unless the system is automatic (self cleaning) or includes gaps for faeces to fall through.

## Outdoor systems

**Note:** RSPCA Standards do not require that hens have access to a range area. However, where they do, the following additional Standards must be met.

- 3.29\* Range areas must be situated and managed to control disease, avoid continuous muddy areas and other conditions that may impact on bird welfare.
- 3.30 Maintenance and management of the range area must ensure that birds are encouraged to access it and are able to forage on all areas, while at the same time discouraging the presence of wild birds and pests. Encouraging foraging behaviour will have the benefit of reducing the risk of feather pecking among the flock. A well-maintained range area should provide birds with palatable vegetation.
- 3.31 All birds must have access to the range for a minimum of 8 hours per day once they are reasonably feathered (i.e. by onset of lay). The only exception to this is during extreme weather conditions (e.g. exceptionally hot or cold weather, high humidity, very strong winds or heavy rain) or under veterinary advice (e.g. due to a disease outbreak).
- 3.32\* Popholes or full opening doors or panels that provide access to the range must be of a height and width that allows birds to easily pass through using a normal posture. The shed layout and position/number of popholes/openings must ensure that all birds have the opportunity to access the range. Pophole/opening design and placement must avoid hens being able to obstruct the movement of other hens, avoid injury to hens and take into account prevailing weather conditions.
- Popholes/openings should be at least 35cm high and provide at least 2.3m width per 1000 hens.
- 3.33\* Adequate and appropriately distributed shelter must be provided on the range area (non-flowering trees and shrubs, long grass, shade cloth or other structures) to protect birds from extreme weather conditions, allow them to move to be 'out of sight' of aerial predators, and encourage birds to access areas of the range not immediately adjacent to the shed.
- At least 8m<sup>2</sup> of overhead shade per 1000 birds should be provided on the range.
- 3.34 Where fences are used, they must be constructed and maintained to restrict the entry of predators or pest animals and to ensure birds are effectively contained. Regular inspection of fences must occur to ensure they remain effective.
- 3.35 Regular inspection of the range must occur to ensure that any foreign bodies that could cause injury to birds are removed and to check that there are no poisonous plants or chemicals accessible to birds.
- 3.36 Any ramps for birds to access outdoor ranges must be less than 60 degrees for ease of bird movement to and from the shed.
- 3.37 Areas surrounding the shed must be well drained and be kept clean and tidy.
- 3.38 The range and adjoining area must be maintained in order to minimise the risk of fire. Contingencies must be in place to minimise the risk to bird welfare in the event of fire or other natural disasters.

## 4 Stocking density

4.1 Space requirements of birds can depend on the live weight and breed/strain of bird in addition to behaviour. Optimum stocking density indoors will also depend on shed conditions (i.e. temperature, ventilation, litter condition).

4.2 An individual group size maximum of 5,000 birds per enclosure is recommended. An enclosure is defined as the area containing a group of birds with access to their own facilities.

### Barn/shed facilities

4.3 Stocking density is calculated on the basis of the usable area of floor space available to the birds.

**Note:** Usable area may include any flooring (including litter, slats or wire-mesh surfaces) and any area occupied by feeding and watering equipment and nest boxes, on one or more levels provided that each area is accessible to the birds. Usable area can only be included where there is sufficient headroom (at least 45cm) between levels and where the area is accessible to stock-persons to observe and reach birds.

4.4 Stocking density in the shed must be no more than

- 9 birds/m<sup>2</sup> of the usable area for sheds that incorporate a raised floor area or
- 7 birds/m<sup>2</sup> of the usable area for indoor deep-litter systems where there is no raised floor area.

**Note:** Stocking density should be considered on the basis of bird condition and overall shed conditions. More space may be required in areas subject to high temperatures and humidity unless appropriate temperature, humidity and ventilation controls are in place and fully operational.

4.5\* Upon occurrence of disease, injury, feather pecking, cannibalism, other indicator of poor welfare or where there is difficulty managing environmental conditions, stocking density must be reviewed and, if necessary, adjusted when a new flock is placed to ensure the welfare of the birds.

### Outdoor facilities

**Note:** RSPCA Standards do not require that hens have access to an outdoor range area. However, where an outdoor range area is provided, the following additional Standards must be met.

4.6 A maximum of 1500 birds per ha of range area to be available to birds in outdoor systems with no rotational range management strategies in place (i.e. a fixed range area).

4.7 A maximum of 2500 birds per ha of range area to be available to birds in outdoor systems with rotational range access, where it can be demonstrated that birds access a well-maintained sustainable range area.

## 5 Management procedures

- 5.1 Persons responsible for the management and/or handling of birds must be appropriately trained and competent in their required tasks, including:
- handling of birds
  - inspection of birds, facilities and shed environment
  - the identification of normal and abnormal bird behaviour and deviations in production targets
  - bird care and treatment of injury or distress
  - euthanasia.
- 5.2\* Birds (except chicks, see section 1.11 and 1.16) must be observed at least once daily to ensure they appear, sound and behave normally and have no signs of illness, injury or disease.
- Stock-persons must walk through the flock slowly to be able to observe individual birds.
  - Inspections should be increased during hot weather or disease outbreak.
  - If necessary, temperature and ventilation must be adjusted to ensure the welfare of the birds (see section 4).
- 5.3 Any weak, ill or injured birds must be identified and promptly treated or euthanased (see section 8) without delay.
- Dead birds must be removed and disposed of promptly and hygienically.
  - Corrective action must be taken where possible.
- 5.4 Where birds are found to be entrapped or have escaped they must be freed or caught immediately. Corrective action must be taken to prevent this situation recurring.
- 5.5\* Records must be kept of mortalities and rates per shed per month calculated.
- Targets for mortalities must be identified.
  - If mortality targets are exceeded, appropriate action must be promptly taken. A mortality rate of 1% or greater of shed population per month must trigger diagnostic and corrective action.
  - The reason for culling must be recorded.
- 5.6 If managers are unable to identify the cause of ill health or disease and the appropriate treatment, veterinary advice must be sought and followed accordingly.

### Induced moulting

- 5.7\* Induced moulting is not permitted regardless of whether the practice uses feed-withdrawal or non feed-withdrawal methods.

## Management of feather pecking and cannibalism

**Note:** RSPCA Australia is concerned about the reliance of beak trimming as a routine method of managing feather pecking and cannibalism and is monitoring the potential for other management strategies to replace beak trimming. The incidence of feather pecking and cannibalism can be reduced by e.g.:

- selecting for less aggressive strains
- optimising diet and ensuring adequate nutrient intake
- offering a diet in mash rather than pelleted form
- providing sufficient feeding space
- stimulating activity e.g. through environmental enrichment
- properly managing lighting and litter
- reducing stocking density

- 5.8 The preferred options for the management of feather pecking and cannibalism are the selection of less aggressive bird strains and use of alternative flock management practices that will eliminate the need for beak trimming (see note above).
- 5.9 Daily monitoring of hens must occur to identify signs of aggressive pecking or cannibalism and the likely causes.
- 5.10 If there are a large number of hens that are feather pecking or cannibalising other hens, action must be taken to adjust management practices (see note above) and to seek further technical or veterinary advice.
- 5.11 Feather condition (as a result of pecking) must be monitored at the end of the laying period to enable management decisions to be made accordingly.
- 5.12 A bird that is injured as a result of feather pecking or cannibalism must be promptly removed for treatment or humanely killed (see section 8).
- 5.13\* Beak trimming must only occur where all other methods of preventing feather pecking have failed. Where beak trimming is considered necessary:
- RSPCA Australia must receive prior notification.
  - It must be performed at the hatchery by a competent operator using an infrared technique.
  - It must only take place once.
  - It must be limited to tipping of the beak only.
- 5.14 Where it is identified that a high number of hens have been incorrectly trimmed, the producer must immediately notify the supplier and RSPCA Australia.

## Other management procedures

- 5.15 Management or husbandry procedures not specified in these Standards must not be performed unless prior approval has been obtained from RSPCA Australia.

## 6 Health

6.1 A Veterinary Health Plan must be in place to maintain the health and welfare of the birds. It should contain details of the following:

- Procedures for the identification and treatment of weak, ill or injured birds, including separation/treatment and euthanasia.
- Procedures to prevent feather pecking and cannibalism.
- A vaccination schedule (where applicable).
- Any prophylactic or corrective medicines administered, their withholding periods, dose rates and when birds should be treated.
- Quarantine and biosecurity procedures (refer to *National farm biosecurity manual: Poultry production*, Commonwealth of Australia and *National water biosecurity manual: Poultry production*, Commonwealth of Australia).
- Cleaning and sanitation procedures.

6.2 Health records must be kept for each batch, including details of:

- Disease, injuries and treatments (including vaccinations) administered to birds.
- All mortalities and culls and reason(s) for culling/death.

**Note:** This information can indicate whether there is any overall management problem so that action can be taken to identify the cause(s) e.g. poor immunology, poor shed conditions, stress, aggression, etc.

6.3\* Medication must be used only in accordance with the instructions on the registered label of the product unless veterinary advice has been given to vary the directions.

- Antibiotics must only be administered for therapeutic purposes under veterinary advice.

6.4 The Veterinary Health Plan must be updated on an annual basis in consultation with the attending veterinarian. RSPCA Australia must be notified of any changes to the Veterinary Health Plan.

## 7 Cleaning and hygiene

- 7.1\* Hand-sanitising facilities and feet dips must be available at the entrance to each shed (the Veterinary Health Plan must include quarantine and biosecurity procedures - see section 6.1).
- 7.2 The premises and equipment must be cleaned thoroughly before restocking to prevent disease carry-over to incoming birds. The shed cleaning principles of an all-in/all-out system should be used between batches of birds.

## 8 On-farm euthanasia

- 8.1 All persons involved in the euthanasia (humane killing on farm) of individual birds must be appropriately trained and competent in the approved method (see section 8.3) to ensure that birds are humanely killed at the first attempt.
- 8.2 Birds must be handled in a manner that ensures that distress or discomfort is minimised.
- 8.3 The approved method for humane killing of individual birds on farm is cervical dislocation (using a quick stretching motion that dislocates the neck vertebrae from the cranium and severs the spinal cord and carotid arteries).
- 8.4\* Killing pliers, other equipment that crushes the neck and methods of cervical dislocation that require spinning of the bird must not be used.
- 8.5 Birds must be monitored in the minutes following killing to ensure that they are dead, that is, there should be no vocalisation, corneal reflex, rhythmic breathing or deliberate movement.
- 8.6 Producers considering cervical dislocation for the planned slaughter of a flock at end of lay (depopulation) must obtain prior approval from RSPCA Australia.

## 9 Pick-up (depopulation)

### Preparation

- 9.1\* Removal of feed and water facilities must be managed to ensure that the total time off feed and water does not exceed 20 hours (from farm to slaughter).
- Birds must have access to water until pick-up commences.
  - Birds must be fed within 12 hours to pick-up commencing.
- 9.2 Lighting must be adjusted appropriately (e.g. dimmed where applicable) to ensure that birds are calm during pick-up.
- 9.3 Access roads and pick-up pads must be well maintained and kept clear to ensure access at pick-up.
- 9.4 An assessment of the birds must be made before pick-up to confirm that they are fit for the intended journey.
- 9.5 Any birds rejected from transport must be promptly treated or humanely killed.
- 9.6\* Transport modules must be inspected to ensure that they are intact and cannot cause injury to birds during loading and transport.
- 9.7 Records of pick-up time and feed and water withdrawal must be maintained as part of the normal batch/consignment documents.

### Pick-up

- 9.8 All persons involved in the pick-up and handling of birds for slaughter off-farm must be appropriately trained and competent to ensure bird welfare is not compromised.
- 9.9\* The catching process must proceed in a manner that prevents birds crowding together. This may include adjusting lighting (e.g. using blue light).
- 9.10\* The catching process must be designed and managed to ensure that distress, discomfort and injury is minimised.
- No more than four birds must be carried in one hand.
  - Catching techniques that may compromise bird welfare must be addressed immediately.
- 9.11\* Transport modules must have a minimum depth of 25cm and either fully open tops or openings of sufficient size to avoid injury to the bird. Every effort should be made to use modular systems with sliding drawers as these pose less risk of injury to birds than fixed crates.
- 9.12\* Transport modules must provide sufficient floor space to allow all birds to sit comfortably at the same time.
- 9.13\* In order to minimise the time that birds are handled/carried, loading into transport modules must take place inside the shed.
- 9.14\* A record must be kept of the total number of birds collected at pick-up.

## 10 Transport

- 10.1 All persons involved in the transport and handling of birds must be appropriately trained and competent to ensure bird welfare is not compromised.
- 10.2\* The timing of transport (including catching, loading and unloading) must be coordinated between the producer, pick-up crew, transporter and processor in order to ensure that birds are not off feed and water for more than 20 hours prior to slaughter and to minimise time birds spend waiting on the vehicle.
- 10.3\* Action must be taken to minimise the risk of heat or cold stress to birds during transport.
- Birds should not be loaded at temperatures over 30°C or where it is likely that the temperature will exceed 30°C during transport. Where this is unavoidable, and in warmer weather, loading of birds must take place during the cooler part of the day. Upon arrival, birds must be appropriately placed in a cooled lairage area prior to being slaughtered without delay.
  - In cooler weather, measures must be taken to avoid wetting or chilling of birds.
- 10.4\* Records of departure and arrival time must be maintained as part of the normal consignment documents.
- 10.5\* Transport mortalities ('dead-on-arrivals') exceeding 1% must trigger appropriate diagnostic and corrective action.

## Slaughter

### 11 Slaughter\*

- 11.1 All persons involved in the handling and slaughter of birds must be appropriately trained and competent to ensure bird welfare is not compromised.
- 11.2 Birds must be slaughtered at the closest available processing plant to their home farm unless prior approval has been obtained from RSPCA Australia.
- 11.3 Only processing plants that have previously been assessed and shown to comply with RSPCA standards by an RSPCA Approved Farming Scheme Assessor may be used to slaughter birds.
- 11.4 On arrival at the processing plant, birds should be unloaded immediately or measures must be taken to prevent birds suffering from heat or cold stress.

## Shackling

**Note:** RSPCA Australia encourages the use of controlled atmosphere systems (CAS) where birds remain in their transport modules upon arrival at the processing plant and are killed using a mixture of gases prior to being shackled. CAS has the benefit of reducing manual handling and avoiding the need to shackle conscious birds. However, research into alternative (less aversive) gas mixtures to those being used currently may offer additional welfare benefits. RSPCA Australia is monitoring these developments.

- 11.5 Shackles must be of a size and type and operated in a manner that does not cause unnecessary pain or distress to the birds.
- Shackling of birds should occur in a low-noise, low light-level area.
  - Birds must be hung on to the shackles by both legs.
  - Handling and hanging technique must reduce the incidence of wing flapping.
  - A breast comforter should run along the length of the line between point of shackling and the stunning bath.
- 11.6 Birds must not be suspended from the shackling line for more than 60 seconds before they are stunned.
- 11.7 Transport modules and the shackling area should be checked to ensure that no birds have been left behind.

## Stunning

- 11.8 Equipment and procedures for stunning must ensure the bird is immediately rendered unconscious without receiving pre-stun shocks from the equipment used.
- 11.9 Birds must be checked to ensure that they have been effectively stunned.
- 11.10 Where the stun has not been effective,
- affected birds must be immediately humanely killed prior to entering the scalding tank, and
  - the equipment must be checked to ensure correct operation.

- 11.11 Bleeding out must commence within 10 seconds of stunning.
- 11.12 Birds must be checked to ensure that they have been effectively bled out prior to entering the scalding tank.
- 11.13 Where bleeding out has not been effective,
- affected birds must be immediately humanely killed prior to entering the scalding tank, and
  - the equipment must be checked to ensure correct operation.

#### Controlled atmosphere killing

- 11.14 Birds must not be subjected to the gas mixture until the correct concentration has been reached and the batch has entered the controlled atmosphere system.
- 11.15 When exiting the controlled atmosphere system, birds must be checked to ensure they are dead.
- 11.16 Where the kill has not been effective,
- affected birds must be immediately humanely killed, and
  - the system must be checked to ensure correct operation.
- 11.17 Should the controlled atmosphere system fail, a back-up slaughter method must be available immediately to ensure humane slaughter of all waiting birds.

**END OF STANDARDS**



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