



# Meat chickens

## RSPCA APPROVED FARMING SCHEME **STANDARDS**

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# Overview

## Introduction

RSPCA Australia seeks to ensure high animal welfare standards through its RSPCA Approved Farming Scheme.

The RSPCA Approved Farming Scheme Standards – Meat chickens set standards that are designed to assist the industry to continually improve and demonstrate good animal welfare outcomes for chicken meat production.

RSPCA Australia believes that the adoption of these Standards will improve the welfare of chicks and chickens in meat chicken production systems through the application of production practices that will meet the bird's 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 (a literature review was conducted to inform the Standards), 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:

- sourcing and management of chicks
- food and water
- environment, housing and accommodation
- management
- health
- pick-up and transport
- slaughter.

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

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

## Scope

These Standards apply to meat chickens kept in eligible systems in Australia.

## Eligibility

Products that are eligible for approval under the RSPCA Approved Farming Scheme must be derived from meat chickens housed in systems which meet the provisions of these Standards.

Definitions of eligible housing systems under the scheme include:

- Barn systems where chickens are free to roam within a shed which meets the specifications of these Standards.
- Free-range systems (chicken meat is marketed as 'free range'), where chickens are housed in sheds, but have, by choice, access to an outdoor range. Both the shed and outdoor range must meet the specifications of these Standards.

## 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.

While these Standards may contain provisions that are of a more rigorous level than those applied in the current Model Codes of Practice or relevant animal welfare Act(s), these Standards do not necessarily repeat all provisions in the legislation. Therefore, it is expected that producers are aware of and comply with the animal welfare requirements in the relevant State/Territory legislation and Codes of Practice including:

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

In addition, where the RSPCA Approved Farming Scheme Standards indicate, compliance is required with the animal welfare requirements in the *National Animal Welfare Standards for the Chicken Meat Industry* and its associated Manuals.

## Requirements of the RSPCA Approved Farming Scheme

Specific requirements of the scheme are detailed in the Operations Manual.

**Note:** The Operations Manual is available to RSPCA Approved Producers and to those intending to apply for RSPCA approval. Contact RSPCA Australia for further details.

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

- The Animal Care Statement including the Veterinary Health Plan (as provided in the Operations Manual) and other relevant documents that specify particular 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

All personnel involved in the supply, rearing, pick-up, transport and slaughter of chickens are expected to be aware of and comply with the animal welfare requirements (specific to their role) in the relevant State/Territory legislation and Codes of Practice including:

- *Australian Model Code of Practice for the Welfare of Animals—Domestic Poultry* (or equivalent Australian Standard or State code where one exists).
- *Australian Standards and Guidelines for the Welfare of Animals—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).

### 1 Sourcing and management of chicks

**Note:** RSPCA Australia is investigating the feasibility of formally approving breeding farms and hatcheries that have arrangements or contracts with Approved Producers. Until that time, chicks to be grown out on RSPCA-Approved chicken farms should be sourced from breeder farms and hatcheries that operate in accordance with the animal welfare requirements in the *Model Code of Practice for the Welfare of Animals—Domestic Poultry*, the *National Animal Welfare Standards for the Chicken Meat Industry* and the relevant breed standards. RSPCA Australia may request to visit the breeder farm or hatchery from which eggs/chicks are sourced to ensure that these facilities operate according to procedures that aim to reduce the risk to bird welfare.

#### Breeding farm (parent flock)

**Note:** RSPCA Australia believes that the fast growth rate of commercial meat chickens can lead to physical and metabolic disorders. Free-range chicks, in particular, should be sourced from slower-growing meat chicken breeds but all birds, regardless of housing system, should be sourced from breeding farms that actively address the welfare issues associated with fast growth rate.

- 1.1 Shed conditions (including lighting, ventilation, temperature and humidity), facilities, space allowance, food and water, level of inspections, health and distress, and husbandry practices 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*, the *National Animal Welfare Standards for the Chicken Meat Industry* and the relevant breed standards.
- 1.2 All breeding farm 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*, the *National Animal Welfare Standards for the Chicken Meat Industry* and the relevant breed standards.

#### Hatchery

- 1.3 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*, the *National Animal Welfare Standards for the Chicken Meat Industry* and the relevant breed standards.

- 1.4 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*, the *National Animal Welfare Standards for the Chicken Meat Industry* and the relevant breed standards.

#### Transport from the hatchery to the grower farm

- 1.5 Transport from the hatchery to the grower farm should be managed at the very minimum in accordance with the animal welfare requirements in the *Australian Standards and Guidelines for the Welfare of Animals—Land Transport of Livestock*.
- 1.6 The scheduling and management of chicks 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.
- 1.7 Temperature during transport of chicks must be monitored and kept within targets (25-35°C) and action taken to prevent chicks being exposed to heat or cold stress.

#### Chick placement

- 1.8 All chicks must be placed within their new housing facilities as soon as possible after arrival.
- 1.9 The number of chicks delivered by the hatchery must be recorded.
- 1.10 Chick transport mortalities ('dead-on-arrivals') must be recorded and reported to the hatchery.
- 1.11 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
  - demarcation of the brooder area (e.g. barriers and paper)
  - appropriate temperature and ventilation settings.
- 1.12 Chicks must be observed at least four times in the first 24 hours following placement to ensure that their appearance, vocalisations and behaviour are normal.
- 1.13 Signs to check for include uneven distribution of the chicks throughout the brooder area (e.g. huddling from being cold or spreading towards the shed perimeter from being hot). 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.

#### Rearing of chicks (brooding)

- 1.14 Chicks should gain weight, or at least maintain their bodyweight, immediately after placement and, particularly, in the first three days of life. Producers should refer to the relevant breed standards for guidance on specific growth rate targets.
- 1.15 Chick mortality must be recorded daily and separated into 'deaths' and 'culls'. A mortality rate of 1% or greater of shed population in the first 7 days of life must trigger diagnostic and corrective action (see section 5.5).

- 1.16 Feed and watering facilities must be well spaced within the brooding area to enable easy access by birds.
- 1.17 Throughout the brooding period, chick behaviour and distribution across the brooding area 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 require sufficient light intensity the first seven days after hatching in order to stimulate activity. Producers should refer to the relevant breed standards for guidance on specific light intensity targets for brooding chicks.
- 1.19 Chicks up to 7 days old are permitted to have longer lighting periods than those specified in section 3.16. Continuous lighting is not permitted.
- 1.20 Brooder barriers must be moved gradually over the period following placement to allow chicks to access the rest of the shed/enclosure.

#### Introduction to range areas

**Note:** RSPCA Standards do not require that chickens have access to an outdoor range. However, where chicken meat is marketed as 'free range', the following additional standard must be met.

- 1.21 Young chickens must be introduced to outdoor range areas as soon as they are reasonably feathered and at the latest between 21-28 days of age (depending on prevailing temperature). Care should be taken to closely observe birds, particularly their body condition, during introduction to range areas. See section 3.19 - 3.27.

## 2 Food and water

- 2.1 Feeding and watering equipment design, position and height must allow all chickens 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 chickens have access to feed and water.
- Water pressure gauges should be checked to be set accurately, to ensure they are operational and that water is available to birds at all times.
  - Feeder adjustment devices should be checked to be operational and that feed is available and accessible at all times.
  - Drinker and feeder lines and individual drinkers and feeders should be inspected at specific sites on a daily basis, in a pattern that covers the whole shed on a weekly basis to ensure water and feed availability/accessibility as required.

### Feed and feeding equipment

- 2.3 Feed must provide nutrients that meet the chickens' requirements. The provision of whole grain as part of the grower/finisher ration is recommended to aid with digestion.
- Producers are required to provide, on request, the feed formulation for any poultry feed currently in use.
  - Any poultry feed on the farm must be made available for testing if required.
- 2.4 Chickens must have unrestricted access to food, with the exception of chickens being treated under veterinary advice or chickens 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 and is accessible to all chickens.
- 2.6 Feed must be delivered at least once daily to feeders and chickens should be observed to be eating.

**Note:** RSPCA Australia is concerned about the reliance on in-feed antibiotics to maintain bird gut health and reduce overall flock mortality. Producers should be monitoring the potential for alternative strategies to replace antibiotic use in the near future. The preferred strategy for preventing disease is a combination of good shed hygiene and farm biosecurity, vaccination (where available), diet composition, and the use of antibiotic alternatives (e.g. prebiotics, probiotics, organic acids, and essential oils).

- 2.7\* Antibiotics must only be administered under veterinary advice. Where it is considered necessary to use antibiotics for prophylactic purposes, producers must seek prior approval from RSPCA Australia. The use of coccidiostats is permitted.

\* indicates an amendment

## Water and watering equipment

- 2.8 Water that is clean, safe and suitable for chickens must be available in sufficient quantity.

**Note:** For further information on water quality, refer to the *Australian and New Zealand Guidelines for Fresh and Marine Water Quality*, Volume 3, Primary Industries. Additionally, estimates of average daily water consumption are available from the *Australian Model Code of Practice for the Welfare of Animals—Domestic Poultry* or the breed standards.

- 2.9 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.
- 2.10 Birds must be observed to be drinking. If drinking is insufficient or excessive, 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 birds 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.
- 2.11 Water supply on the farm must be made available for testing if required.

### 3 Environment, housing and accommodation

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

#### Barn/shed facilities

- 3.4 The principal consideration in planning the layout of the equipment in the shed must be accessibility and ease of use by the chickens. Difficulties in access or use will lead to restrictions in feed and water, causing loss of production and reduced welfare. Important aspects to consider for all buildings are:
  - Are the equipment and chickens spaced evenly throughout the shed?
  - Is the equipment adjustable to meet the needs of the chickens?
  - Does the shed design allow easy observation of all chickens?
- 3.5 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.
- 3.6 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. Contingencies should ensure that shed conditions can be managed and feed and water can be provided to chickens at all times.
- 3.7 Facilities must be constructed and maintained to restrict the entry of wild birds, rodents, predators and other pests that could cause distress or transmit diseases to chickens. Pest control programs must use the most humane effective techniques available.
- 3.8 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

- 3.9 Daily records of indoor temperature and average humidity must be kept at all times.
- 3.10 Shed temperatures should meet recommended targets for chickens at each stage 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.
- 3.11 There must be a maintenance program in place to ensure that facility defects are identified and prompt action is taken to ensure their operation.

#### Litter

- 3.12 The floor of the shed must be completely covered in litter of an appropriate material (e.g. soft wood shavings) to a minimum average depth of 50mm, to allow chickens to dust bathe and forage.

- 3.13 Litter must be of good quality and maintained in a dry and friable condition (except in circumstances where litter may become temporarily damp due to fogger/mister use).
- 3.14 Consideration must be given to the management of temperature, ventilation and humidity and consequent effects on litter condition. In particular:
- Wet areas around the drinkers should not normally exceed 500mm radius (this area will be smaller for young chicks). Some exceptions may occur in very hot weather, when misters/foggers are operating and there is a notable compromise for good management to ensure appropriate ventilation and temperature of the chickens to avoid heat stress.
  - When using foggers, because of the recognised compromise between reducing heat load and maintaining dry litter, careful monitoring of ventilation should occur.
  - Feathers of chickens should appear clean and dry.

### Ventilation

- 3.15 Natural or mechanical ventilation systems must be operational and effective to provide adequate air exchange for the age/weight and number of chickens.
- If ammonia levels exceed 15ppm at bird height, 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.

### Lighting

- 3.16 The lighting system in the shed must provide a minimum period of 8 hours artificial lighting per day (unless chickens have access to natural daylight) and a minimum period of 4 hours continuous darkness (to be provided at night) in every 24-hour period.
- To allow birds to become accustomed to darkness and to allow them to feed prior to lights out, lighting should be switched off in a gradual manner over a period of 30 minutes.
- 3.17 The light levels in the shed must be sufficient to allow chickens to be thoroughly inspected and any problems identified.
- No area of the shed must be lit at less than 20 lux (except during pick-up; see section 9.12).
  - Lighting should be kept as uniform as possible throughout the shed.

### Environmental enrichment

**Note:** RSPCA Standards do not require the provision of perches, however it is strongly encouraged. Where perches are provided they should not injure the chickens, be positioned at a level that is easily accessible at an early age, and be of a width that fully supports the chickens' feet. Other forms of environmental enrichment such as pecking objects are also strongly encouraged.

- 3.18 The provision of at least 1.5 small bales of straw per 1000 birds is required from at least 7 days of age. The size of a small bale is approximately 900mm long x 450mm deep x 350mm high. Straw bales must be replaced as they are broken down to ensure birds have continuous access to perching space.

## Free-range facilities

**Note:** RSPCA Standards do not require that chickens have access to an outdoor range. However, where chicken meat is marketed as 'free range', the following additional standards must be met.

3.19 All birds must have access to the range during daylight hours for a minimum of 8 hours per day once they are reasonably feathered (see section 1.21). 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).

3.20\* Maintenance and management of the range must ensure that chickens are encouraged to access it and are able to forage on all areas. A well-maintained range area should at all times provide chickens with palatable vegetation (including pasture) and be managed to control disease and avoid land degradation.

The total available range area is calculated on the basis of the total floor area in the shed in which the flock is housed and must be

- at least 1.5 times the size of the total shed floor area for new sheds and for existing sheds where the available range area is not limited by the overall farm footprint;
- at least 1 times the size of the total shed floor area for existing sheds where the available range area is limited by the overall farm footprint.

3.21 Access to the range must meet the following requirements:

- Popholes or full opening doors or panels must be a minimum of 30cm high and provide a total opening of at least 30% of the length of the shed on each side.
- The shed layout and position/number of popholes/openings must ensure that all chickens have the opportunity to access the range.
- Pophole/opening design and placement must avoid chickens being able to obstruct the movement of other chickens, avoid injury to chickens and take into account prevailing weather conditions.

3.22 Adequate and appropriately distributed shelter must be provided on the range (trees, shrubs, shade cloth or other structures) to protect chickens from extreme weather conditions and allow them to move to be 'out of sight' of avian predators.

- At least 8m<sup>2</sup> of overhead shade per 1000 birds must be provided on the range.

3.23 Where fences are used, they must be constructed and maintained to restrict the entry of predators or pest animals. Regular inspection of fences must occur to ensure they remain effective.

3.24 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.

3.25 Any ramps for birds to access outdoor ranges must be less than 60 degrees for ease of bird movement to and from the shed.

3.26 Areas surrounding the shed must be well drained and be kept clean and tidy.

3.27 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.

\* indicates an amendment

## 4 Stocking density

- 4.1 Optimum stocking density indoors will depend on good management of shed conditions, i.e. temperature, humidity, ventilation, and litter condition. 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.
- 4.2 Stocking density is calculated on the basis of bird liveweight and the floor space available to the birds in the shed.
- Stocking density must not exceed 28kg per m<sup>2</sup> of available floor area for naturally ventilated sheds.
  - Stocking density must not exceed 34kg per m<sup>2</sup> of available floor area for mechanically ventilated sheds.
- 4.3 Upon occurrence of disease or injury, stocking density must be reviewed and, if necessary, adjusted when a new flock is placed to ensure the welfare of the birds.

## 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 and shed environment
  - the identification of normal and abnormal bird behaviour and deviations in production targets
  - bird care and treatment of injury or distress
  - humane destruction.
- 5.2 Birds (except chicks, see section 1.12) must be observed at least three times in a 24-hour period to ensure that their appearance, vocalisations and behaviour are normal.
- Inspections should be increased during hot weather or disease outbreak.
  - If necessary, temperature, humidity and ventilation controls must be adjusted to ensure the welfare of the birds (see section 4).
- 5.3 Any weak, ill or injured chickens must be identified and promptly treated or humanely euthanased (see section 8) without delay.
- Dead birds must be removed and disposed of promptly and hygienically.
  - The cause of injury/death must be investigated and recorded.
  - 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 week calculated over the life of the flock.
- Targets for mortalities must be identified.
  - If mortality targets are exceeded, appropriate action must be promptly taken. After the first 7 days, a mortality rate of 0.5% or greater of shed population per week must trigger diagnostic and corrective action.
- 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.

## 6 Health

- 6.1 A Veterinary Health Plan must be in place to maintain the health and welfare of the chickens. It should contain details of the following:
- Procedures for the identification and treatment of weak, ill or injured birds, including separation/treatment and humane destruction.
  - Procedures to prevent lameness (see section 6.5 - 6.7) and leg disorders that may lead to hock burn, foot pad burn, breast blisters, back scratches, and/or dirty feathers.
  - 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, May 2009 and *National water biosecurity manual: Poultry production*, Commonwealth of Australia, August 2009).
  - Pest control procedures to restrict access of wild birds, predators and rodents to the flock (see section 3.23).
  - Cleaning and sanitation procedures as required (including procedures for the all-in/all-out system).
- 6.2 Health records must be kept for each batch, including details of vaccinations, disease, mortalities (deaths and culls and reason for culling), injuries and treatments administered to birds. 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, 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.
- 6.4 The Veterinary Health Plan must be updated on an annual basis in consultation with the attending veterinarian.

### Lameness

**Note:** RSPCA Australia believes lameness is a serious welfare problem in meat chickens, causing pain and discomfort to affected birds. The incidence of lameness can be reduced by selecting slower-growing strains, by providing birds with sufficient rest, by providing proper nutrition to manage growth rate, by stimulating activity, and properly managing the litter.

- 6.5 Producers must monitor birds for signs of lameness, investigate the cause, and take corrective action which aims to prevent lameness from worsening and from occurring in future flocks.
- 6.6 Chickens with a gait score of 2 (see box below) that are not able to walk must be humanely killed immediately unless veterinary advice indicates that the condition can be cured and immediate measures are taken to do so.
- 6.7 Severely lame birds with a gait score of 2 (see below) should not make up more than 1% of the flock at any time.

#### Gait score (Dawkins 2004)

0 = normal (bird walks at least 10 steps with ease and is well balanced)

1 = abnormal (bird walks abnormally for at least 10 steps with an uneven stride and is unbalanced)

2 = unacceptable (bird is reluctant to walk or not able to walk)

## 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 cleaning principles of an all-in/all-out system should be used between batches of chickens.

## 8 On-farm culling

- 8.1 All persons involved in the on-farm culling (euthanasia) of individual birds must be appropriately trained and competent.
- 8.2 Chickens must be handled and humanely killed in a manner that ensures that distress or discomfort is minimised.
- 8.3 The approved method for humane killing of individual chickens on-farm is cervical dislocation.
- 8.4 Chickens 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.

## 9 Pick-up (catching)

**Note:** RSPCA Australia believes that the practice of "thinning out", i.e. partially depopulating a shed, has the advantage of providing more space for the remaining birds, but can compromise the welfare of chickens not being collected at the time. Preparation and catching should aim to minimise the effects on bird welfare of feed and water deprivation; noise; dust; disruption of rest; and, thermal discomfort.

### Preparation

- 9.1 Removal of feed and water facilities must be managed to ensure that the time off feed and water for chickens being collected for slaughter does not exceed 18 hours.
  - Birds remaining in the shed following partial depopulation must be given access to feed and water immediately following completion of pick-up.
- 9.2 Lighting must be adjusted appropriately (e.g. dimmed where applicable) to ensure that birds are calm during catching.
- 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 birds must be made before pick-up to confirm that chickens 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

**Note:** RSPCA Australia encourages producers to use mechanical harvesters as these have some welfare advantages over manual catching of birds. When catching birds manually, it is recommended to grasp and carry the bird by both legs.

- 9.8 All persons involved in the pick-up and handling of chickens must be appropriately trained and competent.
- 9.9 The catching process must be designed and managed to ensure that distress or discomfort is minimised.
- 9.10 No more than four birds must be carried in one hand.
- 9.11 Inappropriate catching techniques used by the pick-up crew must be addressed immediately.
- 9.12 The catching process must proceed in a manner that prevents birds crowding together. This may include adjusting lighting (e.g. using blue light) or using partitions.
- 9.13 Transport modules must have a minimum depth of 23cm and a minimum opening of 20cm wide.
- 9.14 In order to minimise the time that birds are handled/carried, loading into transport modules must take place inside the shed.
- 9.15 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 chickens must be appropriately trained and competent.
- 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 18 hours prior to slaughter (see section 11.4) 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.
  - Chickens must not be loaded at temperatures over 30°C or where it is likely that the temperature will exceed 30°C during transport.
  - In warmer weather, loading of birds must take place during the cooler part of the day. Alternatively, loading must take place at a time that ensures birds are immediately slaughtered upon arrival at the processing plant.
  - 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 0.1% must be reported to RSPCA Australia.

## 11 Slaughter

- 11.1 All persons involved in the handling and slaughter of chickens must be appropriately trained and competent.
- 11.2 Chickens must be slaughtered at the closest available processing plant (or, as applicable, company processing plant) to their home farm unless prior approval has been obtained from RSPCA Australia.
- 11.3 Only processing plants that have previously been inspected and approved by an RSPCA Approved Farming Scheme Assessor may be used to slaughter RSPCA-Approved chickens.
- 11.4 The time period from removal from feed to slaughter must not exceed 18 hours.

### 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 live 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.
- Handling and hanging technique must reduce the incidence of wing flapping.
- 11.6 Shackling of birds must occur in a purpose built area with a maximum light level of 5 lux.
- 11.7 Birds must not be suspended from the shackling line for more than 60 seconds before they are stunned.
- 11.8 Transport modules and the shackling area should be checked to ensure that no birds have been left behind.

### Stunning

- 11.9 Equipment and procedures for stunning must ensure the bird is immediately rendered unconscious without receiving pre-stun shocks from the equipment used.
- 11.10 All birds must be checked to ensure that they have been effectively stunned.
- 11.11 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.

### Bleeding out

- 11.12 Bleeding out must commence within 10 seconds of stunning.
- 11.13 All birds must be checked to ensure that they have been effectively bled out prior to entering the scalding tank.

11.14 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

11.15 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.

11.16 When exiting the controlled atmosphere system, birds must be checked to ensure they are dead.

11.17 Where the kill has not been effective,

- affected birds must be immediately humanely killed by cervical dislocation, and
- the system must be checked to ensure correct operation.

11.18 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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