

# Poultry Slaughter

## *The Need for Legislation*



L. Parascandola

*“Slaughter is different from processing in that the raw material is alive, has a central nervous system, can express emotional states, and has biological components like humans.” – Dr. Janice Swanson, American Meat Institute Foundation’s Annual Animal Handling and Stunning Conference, February 21-22, 2002*

*“Do you think from your perception that the birds have a sense of what is going to happen to them?”*

*“Yes. They try everything in their power to get away from the killing machine and to get away from you. They have been stunned, so their muscles don’t work, but their eyes do, and you can tell by them looking at you, they’re scared to death.” – Virgil Butler, former Tyson slaughterhouse worker (1)*



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# Catching & Transport of Chickens and Other Birds Slaughtered for Meat

At the poultry slaughter plant each day thousands of birds are crammed inside crates stacked on trucks waiting to be killed. Truckload after truckload pulls into the holding dock where huge fans rotate to reduce the number of birds who will die of heat prostration while waiting to enter the slaughterhouse. In winter many birds freeze to death waiting to be killed. A forklift picks the topmost pallet of crates off each flatbed truck, and the birds disappear into the darkness.



Frank Johnston, The Washington Post

They come out of the darkness. “Live haul involves hand catching the birds, mostly at night, in a darkened dust-laden atmosphere,” a USDA manual explains (2). Men move into the barns clapping their hands and shouting to make room for a forklift with a cabinet of transport crates. When the forklift drops the cabinet, the men corner the chickens, grab them by their legs and stuff them into the crates like trash in a can. In the 1990s, chicken-catching machines resembling giant street sweepers were also introduced. These 6-ton machines move through the chickens, scooping up 7,000 birds an hour with rubber finger-like projections that place them on a conveyor belt. The belt carries the birds into the machine where they are placed automatically in crates. When a crate is full, a forklift loads it onto the truck. When the truck is filled with crated birds, they are driven to the slaughterhouse.



Frank Johnston, The Washington Post



Joey Gardney - Associated Press



Carol McCormick

## At the Slaughterhouse

*“Every chicken is bled out while still sentient. The chickens hang there and look at you while they are bleeding. They try to hide their head from you by sticking it under the wing of the chicken next to them on the slaughter line. You can tell by them looking at you, they’re scared to death.” – Virgil Butler, “Clarification on Stunner Usage” (3)*

### Shackling

At the slaughterhouse, the birds sit in the trucks without food or water for 1 to 9 hours or more waiting to be killed. Inside the plant, in the “live-hang” area, they are violently jammed onto a movable metal rack that clamps them upside down by their feet. Suspending these heavy birds, most of them already crippled, upside down by their feet puts an intensely painful strain on their legs and hips. In addition, many birds are hung by only one leg, adding to their agony.

### Electrical Immobilization

The birds’ heads and upper bodies are then dragged through a splashing electrified water trough called a “stunner.” This water, which is cold and salted to conduct the electricity, does not actually stun the birds. Its purpose is to immobilize



them to keep them from thrashing on the slaughter line and to paralyze the muscles of their feather follicles so that their feathers will come out easily after they are dead. For these reasons, 25 million chickens, turkeys, and ducks are tortured every day in the U.S. with volts of electricity in federally-inspected slaughterhouses (4).

### **Neck-Cutting**

Following the electrified “stun” bath, the paralyzed but fully conscious birds’ throats are cut by a rotating machine blade and/or a manual neck cutter. Although both carotid arteries should be severed quickly to ensure a relatively rapid death, these arteries, which carry the oxygenated blood responsible for consciousness to the brain, are deeply embedded in the bird’s neck and are therefore often missed.

### **Bleedout Tunnel and Scald Tank**

Still alive – the industry intentionally keeps the birds alive during the slaughter process so that their hearts will continue to pump blood -- they then hang upside down for 90 seconds in a bleedout tunnel where they’re supposed to die from blood loss. However, millions of birds do not die and many drown in pools of blood when the conveyor belt dips too close to the floor. Dead or alive, the birds are then dumped into tanks of scalding water. According to a former slaughterhouse worker, when chickens are scalded alive, they “flop, scream, kick, and their eyeballs pop out of their heads. They often come out of the other end with broken bones and disfigured and missing body parts because they’ve struggled so much in the tank” (5).

## **Gas Stun-Killing of Birds**

***“Because gas-stunned birds regain consciousness rapidly, they must be killed, rather than stunned, by the gas.”***  
**Peter Stevenson, *Animal Welfare Problems in UK Slaughterhouses*. Compassion In World Farming (6)**

Animal welfarists are calling for a gas-based technology that kills the birds in the transport crates prior to shackling, thus sparing them the pain, terror and torture of live shackling, electrical shock, neck cutting, and for millions of birds each year, being scalded alive. Both neck cutting and carbon dioxide (CO<sub>2</sub>) are “distressing and inevitably painful,” says animal scientist Mohan Raj. When CO<sub>2</sub> levels exceed 30 percent, birds gasp, shake their heads, and stretch their necks (unsuccessfully) to breathe. By contrast, birds exposed to pure argon/nitrogen gases apparently do not experience aversion to these gases, because birds, like humans, have chemical receptors in their lungs that are very sensitive to CO<sub>2</sub>, but they do not have receptors to detect argon or nitrogen. Presumably, birds exposed to these gases do not experience the pain, panic, and suffocation caused by CO<sub>2</sub> (7). However, birds exposed to pure argon/nitrogen gases flap their wings violently as they die, resulting in broken wing bones. Since these broken wings cannot be marketed to consumers of “buffalo wings,” the poultry industry will not adopt pure argon/nitrogen. Some slaughter plants have adopted a compromise system of locking chickens and turkeys in chambers filled with varying combinations of CO<sub>2</sub>, argon, nitrogen, and oxygen before cutting their throats. The welfare issue with all of these systems is not which one is “more humane” but, rather, which one is the least inhumane.



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## Decompression

In 2010, a system of decompressing poultry to death, known as a “low atmosphere pressure system,” or LAPS, was introduced at a chicken slaughter plant in Arkansas. The birds are placed in a sealed cylindrical chamber and the pressure in the chamber “is reduced at a continuous rate to a target decompression pressure for a period of time until a state of death is obtained.”

Though called “humane” by some poultry researchers, a 2007 report by the American Veterinary Medical Association calls decompression “unacceptable for euthanasia.” Decompression – used in the 1950s

to destroy homeless shelter animals – has been discontinued in U.S. animal shelters for being cruel and inhumane. Decompression causes excruciatingly painful gas bubbles to expand within the body, along with ruptured eardrums, crushed lungs, convulsions, loss of posture, and in chickens undergoing decompression, “low guttural moaning” while they die (8).



O.K. Industries

## Ritual and Live Market Slaughter

Technically, ritual slaughter refers to “a method of slaughter whereby the animal suffers loss of consciousness by anemia of the brain caused by the simultaneous and instantaneous severance of the carotid arteries with a sharp instrument” (9). In practice, “ritual slaughter” is likely to involve severing the windpipe and jugular vein of unstunned birds and ramming the birds into killing cones after their throats are cut (10). At Empire Kosher, birds packed in crates are dumped onto to an assembly line, seized by a worker and held by another to the slaughterer’s blade, then stuffed head down in killing cones (“funnels”) to bleed to death – 240,000 chickens and 27,000 turkeys each week (11).



Carol Guzy, The Washington Post

## Killing Unwanted Birds

### Killing Unwanted “Meat-Type” Birds

In 2002, workers at a Puerto Rican slaughter plant beat 76,000 chickens to death with sticks, metal tubes and baseball bats because, according to a plant executive, “they did not come up to the high standards of quality which we demand” (12). In 2003, the U.S. Department of Agriculture destroyed 3.5 million “meat-type” and “egg-type” chickens in California to stop the spread of Exotic Newcastle Disease. In 2004, the Canadian government brutally destroyed 19 million birds during an avian influenza outbreak in British Columbia, and in 2007, the British government



David Harp

**Birds Suffocated with Government Approved Firefighting Foam**



destroyed 159,000 turkeys on an avian influenza-infected farm in East Anglia, the heart of Britain's poultry industry. In 2007, researchers from the University of Delaware suffocated 25,000 male turkeys in firefighting foam on a farm infected with avian influenza in West Virginia (13). Massacres like these are worldwide. While international bodies call for the mass destruction of all birds exposed to highly pathogenic influenza viruses, there are no regulations governing how the birds will be killed. Methods include beating, burning, drowning, gassing, neck wringing, firefighting foam, and macerators (grinders).

### **Killing Unwanted "Egg-Laying" Hens**

***"When I visited a large egg layer operation and saw old hens that had reached the end of their productive life, I WAS HORRIFIED. Egg layers bred for maximum egg production were nervous wrecks that had beaten off half their feathers by constant flapping against the cage."* – Temple Grandin (14)**

Because "spent" hens have no market value, few slaughter plants will take them. To get rid of these hens, farmers suffocate them to death in giant Dumpsters, gas them to death with carbon dioxide (CO<sub>2</sub>), and bury them alive in landfills. According to Tom Hughes of the Canadian Farm Animal Trust, "The simplest method of disposal is to pack the birds, alive, into containers, and bulldoze them into the ground" (15). In 2003, workers at a battery-hen complex in California threw 30,000 live hens into wood-chipping machines which cut them to pieces (16). In 2009, 35,000 "cage-free" hens were "depopulated" on a Virginia farm by being stuffed into metal boxes and burned to death with freezing CO<sub>2</sub> hosed into the boxes. All of these methods are routinely used to get rid of unwanted populations of laying hens, caged or uncaged (17).

### **Killing Unwanted Chicks**

***Countless chicks become mangled from the machinery, are suffocated in plastic bags, or deemed "surplus" and dumped (along with injured chicks) into the same disposal system as the discarded eggshells they were separated from hours earlier. "Inside a Turkey Hatchery" (18)***

Along with defective and slow-hatching female chicks, the U.S. egg industry trashes a quarter of a billion male chicks each year as soon as they hatch because the males don't lay eggs. Instead of being sheltered by a mother hen's wings, the newborns are ground up alive or thrown into trashcans where they slowly suffocate on top of one another, peeping pitifully as a human foot stomps them down to make room for more chicks. Some hatcheries gas the chicks with carbon dioxide (CO<sub>2</sub>). Ruth Harrison, author of *Animal Machines*, said she stopped supporting CO<sub>2</sub> gassing of chicks after subjecting herself to inhalation of various gas concentrations. She said, "In my opinion, it is no better than the old practice of filling up a dustbin with them and letting them suffocate" (19). Hatchery destruction of unwanted newborns is a worldwide practice.



Mercy For Animals



San Diego County Department of Animal Services



The Animals Voice

## “Humane” Slaughter Laws for Poultry

There are no federal laws governing the raising, transport, or slaughter of poultry in the United States. Although birds represent 99 percent of land animals slaughtered for food in the U.S., they are excluded from the federal Humane Methods of Slaughter Act. Canada has an unenforceable *Recommended Code of Practice*, and the UK leaves enforcement of its welfare laws to the Meat Hygiene Service and an unenforceable *Ministry of Agricultural Code of Practice*.

In 2005, The Humane Society of the United States (HSUS) sued the U.S. Department of Agriculture to require that poultry be covered by the federal Humane Methods of Slaughter Act and to require that birds be killed or rendered unconscious prior to being slaughtered (20). However, the lawsuit was dismissed by the federal district court in San Francisco in 2009 on the claim that poultry are not “livestock” as defined by the 1958 Humane Methods of Slaughter Act. HSUS appealed this ruling to the U.S. Ninth Circuit Court of Appeals, but the appeals court upheld the ruling and dismissed the lawsuit in 2010 (21).

### Federal Legislation

Although no truly humane system of slaughter can be devised, conditions in the U.S. might be improved by redefining “livestock” in the Humane Methods of Slaughter Act to include poultry, or by amending the 1957 Poultry Products Inspection Act (21 U.S. Code of Federal Regulations) to include a humane slaughter provision for poultry. The latter approach was unsuccessfully tried in three bills introduced by Congressman Andrew Jacobs of Indiana in the 1990s: H.R. 4124 (1992); H.R. 649 (1993); and H.R. 264 (1995). Despite a vigorous lobby by United Poultry Concerns, all of these bills died in the House Agricultural Livestock Subcommittee to which they were referred, and efforts to get a Senate companion bill failed (22).



Carol McCormick

## Poultry Slaughtered Under Federal Inspection in the United States in 2009

Chickens: 7.82 billion

Turkeys: 275 million

Ducks: 21.9 million

For a breakdown of animals slaughtered in 2009 in the United States, see:

[www.upc-online.org/slaughter/2009americans.html](http://www.upc-online.org/slaughter/2009americans.html).

## Poultry Slaughtered in the World in 2007

In 2007, Europe slaughtered over 7 billion chickens. Canada slaughtered 640 million chickens and Great Britain slaughtered 850 million chickens. Worldwide, approximately 52 billion birds were reported slaughtered in 2007, more



than 50 billion of them chickens, including egg-laying hens, according to the *WATT Executive Guide To World Poultry Trends 2009/10*. For additional statistics and industry forecasts in the *WATT Executive Guide*, see <http://viewer.zmags.com/publication/c978d46b#/c978d46b/1>.

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## Further Reading

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## ***Show Congress You Care About These Birds and Urge Your Representatives to Join You***

The purpose of a humane slaughter law is to codify obligations already accepted by society. The absence of a law to protect poultry conveys the false notion to the public, and to those who work directly with poultry, that these birds do not suffer, or that their suffering does not matter, and that humans have no merciful obligation to birds. Please contact your Members of Congress (your two Senators and your House Representative) and urge them to sponsor and support humane slaughter legislation that covers poultry the same as mammals. The most effective letter is a personal one. It should be concise, informed, and polite.

The Honorable \_\_\_\_\_  
United States Senate  
Washington, DC 20510  
Dear Senator \_\_\_\_\_

The Honorable \_\_\_\_\_  
United States House of Representatives  
Washington, DC 20515  
Dear Representative \_\_\_\_\_

To learn your Members of Congress call the Capital Switchboard: 202-224-3121.

Or visit [www.senate.gov](http://www.senate.gov) or [www.house.gov](http://www.house.gov).



Linda Howard

### ***From Poultry in Heaven to Poultry on Earth***

*"Don't be afraid.  
The pain won't last long.  
Soon it will be over.  
Don't be afraid.  
The pain will end quickly.  
Your friends will be near you.*

*"Go on—it's time.  
You have no choice.  
Just close your eyes—don't look at the blood.  
Soon it will be over.  
Soon you will be  
Right here in heaven.  
Dead like me."*

*—Laurie Cloud*

**United Poultry Concerns is a nonprofit organization that promotes the compassionate and respectful treatment of domestic fowl. Please join us and support our work.**



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