

Business

Investigation

Chicken has become a cut-price protein. We consume more of it than any other meat, and the amount we eat is expected to keep climbing. While the price of chicken has dropped, production has boomed and critics say it has a cost to animal welfare. **Gerard Hutching** investigates.

They come for them at night, when the chickens are docile enough to be handled. They grasp them by the feet, sometimes five in each hand, then carry them to the transport cages.

All night it goes on, until by morning thousands have been removed. The operation is meant to be over by the time it's light but it continues until noon. By then 250,000 chickens have been sent to the slaughterhouse.

Left behind are thousands of dead birds which have been smothered in the panic.

It was just such a scene at one of New Zealand's industrial poultry farms in 2015 that sufficiently appalled a night-shift team leader to complain to the Ministry for Primary Industries (MPI).

He said the farm, which was contracted to Tegel, was guilty of mass smotherings, catchers collecting too many birds at once, loading them incorrectly into crates, and withholding food and water for too long.

Tegel itself recognised the problem because chickens were arriving at the processing plant with severe bruising and haemorrhaging.

The complainant put part of the problem down to the high staff turnover of mostly Tongan and Asian workers, low wages and poor training.

In its report on the incident, MPI warned the farm owner that inspectors would visit to observe the chicken catching process, and nominated a day.

According to the report, it was a "random, on-the-spot" visit. The workers were seen carrying two chickens per hand, the correct number were placed into crates, and overall, the process complied with the welfare code.

MPI dismissed the complaint, advising the night-shift leader the problem was more related to a dispute he had with a forklift driver who was incorrectly loading the chickens on trucks. As a result, 548 died of overheating.

Such reported incidents are rare. In the past five years there have been only four complaints, none of them leading to a prosecution, MPI said in response to an Official Information Act request.

In one of these complaints, a pile of 40-50 chickens was seen out the back of a Tegel meat chicken farm near Auckland, a number of them still alive among the dead – eyes open, unable to move or stand. The operational manager was "extremely contrite", and MPI issued a warning.

A 2015 complaint about a Tegel farm near Christchurch detailed: "As many as 800-900 birds per day on average getting smothered in the sheds by the catchers chasing them and causing the birds to get pushed up against the wall". MPI ruled this was a "vexatious complaint".

Poultry Industry Association chief executive Michael Brooks says the industry has the lowest number of animal welfare complaints and prosecutions of any sector in New Zealand agriculture.

But critics cite the reluctance of workers to make complaints and MPI's unwillingness to crack down on the industry as factors in the lack of prosecutions.

The National Animal Welfare Advisory Committee sets out a code of welfare for meat



Playing chicken with animal welfare

chickens. Under the section Physical Handling, it points out that transport and handling of animals is innately stressful, and that must be taken into account.

Other welfare issues have been raised as proof there is something not right with the industry.

The modern meat chicken or broiler is unrecognisable from that of 40 years ago, when birds took 12 weeks to reach their slaughter weight of 2 kilograms. Today the plump Ross and Cobb breeds tip the 2kg mark in just five weeks.

This speed to market, backed by an intense farming regime, has helped chicken become an affordable luxury; an easy protein to purchase at a price that's fallen in relative terms in the past 20 years.

The sheer number of chickens now processed by

the industry is as hefty, with more than 95 million fresh chickens killed for eating in 2017 compared with frozen, a lowly 23 million. In 1996 just over 39m fresh chickens were processed by the industry.

During the same time the price has halved in real terms. While the volume of red meat we eat has dropped, chicken has forged ever upwards. It's estimated we eat about 20 chickens each per year on average.

But what is life like for a meat chicken?

Typically they spend their short lives in windowless sheds, packed in with upwards of 40,000 other birds and weeks of accumulated waste.

Bred to produce the maximum amount of meat in the minimum amount of time, broilers often become so top-heavy that they can't support their own weight.

American professor of animal science Temple Grandin has stated "lameness is the single most important welfare issue in the meat chicken industry", and is contrary to the five animal freedoms New Zealand recognises under its Animal Welfare Act.

These are freedom from hunger and thirst, discomfort, pain, injury and disease, and freedom to express normal behaviours.

Recently AgResearch scientists studied the leg health of 6409 broilers on 20 North Island farms.

Since last carrying out similar research in 2005, they discovered an increase in shed and flock sizes, and a hike in the average growth rate of the birds. They also found evidence that heavier and older birds were becoming more lame.

Packing too many chickens in a shed is a recipe for problems. In the first weeks when they are small there is plenty of room to spare, but by 32 days of age there are about 19 birds weighing about 2kg each crammed into a square metre.



Poultry Industry Association chief executive Michael Brooks.

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'Caviar' goes for paltry prices

Susan Edmunds

In the space of a generation, chicken has undergone a transformation: From a treat meal to a weeknight staple for many families.

Ninety-five per cent of New Zealand households now purchase fresh chicken in the course of a year, and 65 per cent buy fresh.

A spokeswoman for supermarket chain Countdown said it had become the country's most popular meat in the past four years because it was an affordable source of protein, and a versatile meal option.

"Fresh poultry continues to grow faster than alternatives like beef, lamb and pork."

And while the cost of those other meats has increased, the price of chicken has fallen dra-

matically in real terms.

In 1989, the cost of a number eight frozen chicken in nominal terms was \$7.69. Now, we pay about \$7.62.

Food inflation over that same period of time is about 195 per cent – so the cost of chicken in real terms is about half what it was in the 1980s.

By comparison, the price of a kilogram of blade steak has increased from \$8.71 to \$18.08 over the same time, a kilogram of porterhouse steak has gone from \$12.85 to \$29.10, mince is up from \$6.17 to \$13.97 and the price of fish has risen from \$14.31 to \$32.29.

Economist Gareth Kiernan, of Infometrics, said intensive farming practices were responsible for bringing the cost of chicken down compared to other meats.

"Although there is now some pushback against these practices

"If it was someone's birthday, they used to have a roast chicken as a special treat."

Economist Gareth Kiernan

from due to animal welfare concerns," he said.

"My grandmother used to have a Sunday roast, which was typically beef or lamb. However, if it was someone's birthday, they used to have a roast chicken as a special treat – a practice that persisted into the 1990s or 2000s even though the roles should have been reversed given the price of beef or lamb."

Food historian Dave Veart remembers asking for chicken for a birthday meal as being "akin to asking for caviar". Desexed roosters called capons used to be popular but were ordered weeks in advance.

Over time, chicken became a more common sight on shop shelves, initially in frozen portions and then increasingly as "flash restaurant food", such as Chicken Maryland.

It was not until the 1960s that advertisements for Tegel started to appear in cookbooks.

"There'd be a photo of a woman with enormous hair and a tiny chicken. The chickens were really scrawny-looking compared to the ones you buy today. That's a product of our changed animal husbandry ... [chickens] lend themselves to being manipulated."

The arrival of fast food operator Kentucky Fried Chicken in New Zealand in 1971 sealed the impression of chicken as "cheap", he said.

Chicken was also popular with New Zealand's growing Pacific and Asian populations.

"In places with big Pacific Island populations you tend to find local fried chicken places that even undercut KFC," Veart said.

He expected the popularity of chicken to continue to grow as people moved away from red meat consumption.

Countdown said free-range poultry was the fastest-growing segment of the market.

The supermarket chain has announced a move to sell only free-range pork but is unlikely to follow suit with chicken because it is a much bigger market.

Playing chicken with welfare

FROM PAGE 40

welfare committee allows 38kg per square metre but adds the coda that "recommended best practice is less than 30 kg per square metre at all times".

At their heaviest, broilers are on average 2.5kg, meaning there should not be more than 12 per square metre.

Brooks points out the SPCA itself does not follow its own principle, since it accredits some companies which keep chickens at a stocking rate of 34kg per square metre.

New Zealand is ahead of such regions as the European Union, where rates go up to 42kg per square metre.

But trying to pin down precise mortality rates of meat chickens is difficult. Brooks says New Zealand industry reports "1.8 up to 2.2 per cent" and the country is recognised for having low rates.

An MPI report following a New Plymouth complaint is a succinct summation of the life of a meat chicken.

Between 8200-8700 18-week-old chicks are delivered to the farm's four big sheds. They spend six-to-eight weeks indoors, never seeing the "external environment", before those that have survived "thinning" or being culled are transported on for further "ongrowing".

At slaughtering time, broilers are shackled by their feet, hung from a conveyor belt, and dipped into an electrified bath known as "the stunner." They then have their throats cut automatically, although people are always present to ensure that



none are missed. This is the preferred system used in the US, Britain, Australia and New Zealand.

However, in Europe animals are generally stunned by gassing, considered to offer a higher standard of welfare.

Brooks argues that despite these issues, "independent" vets say New Zealand is the best place in the world to raise chickens.

The SPCA acknowledges New Zealand is ahead of most other countries. In China, India and Brazil, animal welfare legislation is largely absent.

Nevertheless, change is being forced on the industry. Consumers want to know the chickens they are eating are produced under better welfare standards.

Marianne Macdonald of Safe says there is a growing international movement towards slower-

These chickens at Turks Poultry, Foxton, have the option of roaming outside, but an instinctive fear of predators keeps them indoors.

GRANT MATTHEW/STUFF

growing breeds which do not suffer as much from issues such as lameness.

In the US and Europe, McCain Foods, Nestle and Kraft-Heinz have all committed to stop using fast-grow genetic chickens. They have also started to enrich the environment of broilers with more natural light and straw bales which encourage scratching behaviour, and they are reducing stocking densities.

Whether consumers will be prepared to pay the higher prices for these remains to be seen. They not only eat 30 per cent more feed, but they require more space.

But as Macdonald points out, unless the industry moves away from the use of fast-grow genetics, it will only continue to raise birds "bred to suffer".

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