

Protection of chickens kept for meat production

2005/0099(CNS) - 07/04/2016 - Follow-up document

In accordance with Council Directive (EC) 2007/43/EC, the Commission presented a report on the impact of genetic selection on the welfare of chickens kept for meat production (broilers).

To prepare this report, in 2010 the Commission requested a scientific opinion from the European Food Safety Authority (EFSA) which was updated in 20123 and mandated an economic study, completed in 2013.

Production, trade and consumption in the EU: in 2014, EU chicken meat production (chickens for meat production are also called "broilers") reached **10.5 million tonnes**, representing about 6.5 billion birds and around **12% of world production**. In 2010 there were more than 2.2 million broiler farms in the EU-27. However, there were only 20.000 farms with more than 5.000 broilers.

With an average consumption of **26.8 kg per capita per year in 2014**, chicken meat constitutes the second largest consumed meat in the EU. The main buyers of chicken meat are the Netherlands, United Kingdom, Germany and France.

Breeding selection: genetic selection identifies the most appropriate birds to become the parents of the next generation. It determines the traits for which a specific line is selected in order to meet the market demands.

In the last decades, a wide range of metabolic and behavioural traits in broilers have been modified by genetic selection, leading to various welfare issues, such as **legs and locomotion**, **ascites** and sudden death syndrome (SDS) as well as skin diseases such as **contact dermatitis**.

Regarding the main welfare impacts, scientific studies quoted by EFSA have shown that:

- the genetic correlations between traits such as specific skeletal problems and growth should permit a genetic improvement in leg health along with a continued, though more modest, improvement in growth rate;
- it is possible to develop a resistant line to ascites since it appears that there are only a few genes responsible for ascites susceptibility and they have a high heritability. Sudden Death Syndrome has a correlation with ascites;
- there is a low genetic correlation between contact dermatitis (food pad and hock burn) with body weight suggesting that selection against susceptibility to footpad dermatitis should be possible without adverse effect on weight.

Against this background, the report noted that **positive signals of a better integration of welfare issues** into the selection process of breeding programmes can already be found. For instance recent surveys in commercial flocks report a decrease in the incidence of leg problems and ascites during the last 10 years.

The current situation: the report stated that new technologies based on genetic markers can assist in the genetic selection to identify birds that carry desirable genes. The genetic selection in breeding programmes has contributed to ensuring a competitive broiler production in the EU, however, the **level of genetic improvements or of individual traits cannot be quantified** in this report due to the lack of access to confidential breeder data.

Furthermore, in general, **market pressure** does not currently provide breeding companies with sufficient incentive to give welfare traits greater weighting in their breeding programmes.

Selection programmes are a useful tool for the improvement of certain production traits in commercial lines. However, they have also led to a **loss of genetic diversity**. This is the reason why the EU Community programme on the conservation, characterisation, collection and utilisation of genetic resources in agriculture promotes genetic diversity.

Main conclusions: the Commission considered that the current legislation provides a **monitoring system for animal welfare indicators** in commercial conditions which could be further exploited in a context of genetic selection.

Moreover, consumers expressed increasingly interest for broilers selected for welfare traits which are produced under increased costs. **The presence of animal welfare information** at different levels and tailored specifically for each type of audience (school, media...) could help to increase the demand for animal welfare friendly products.

The Commission stated that **no legislative proposal is deemed necessary at this stage**. In line with its mandate on animal welfare and through the existing tools, the European Commission is willing to facilitate improvements in this area.