The Five Freedoms for Good Animal Welfare

As the divide between consumers and agriculture continues to widen, the need for more scientifically based information increases. One area of concern to many is the confinement of large numbers of birds in barns or houses. These operations are frequently characterized as “bad for the animals” simply because they have large numbers of birds. Big does not equal bad nor does small equal good. Either system can be either bad or good depending upon the management. And, the major poultry producers in the United States have systems in place to assure proper care of the birds.

Poultry Welfare

In 1964, Ruth Harrison’s book, Animal Machines: The New Factory Farming Industry, was published in England. The book described intensive livestock and poultry farming practices as they existed at the time in Great Britain. The next year, the British government responded by establishing a committee to look into the welfare of farm animals. Professor Roger Brambell was asked to chair the committee which presented the “Report of the Technical Committee to Enquire into the Welfare of Animals Kept Under Intensive Livestock Husbandry Systems.” This report became known as “The Brambell Report.”

The conclusion of the report was that animals should have the freedom “to stand up, lie down, turn around, groom themselves and stretch their limbs.” This became the “Five Freedoms” for farm animal welfare. Today, these freedoms have been somewhat expanded and adopted by a wide variety of organizations including the World Health Organization. Even without formal adoption, various groups use these criteria as a basis for establishing detailed animal welfare policies and audit criteria.

The Five Freedoms and the Modern Broiler Industry

1. Freedom from thirst, hunger and malnutrition – by ready access to fresh water and a diet to maintain full health and vigor.

Modern housing is designed to provide enough water and food for every bird. In the United States, these buildings are equipped so that chickens do not have to go more than 15-25 feet to obtain either feed or water. In addition, there is feed available for the birds all day every day so they can eat as often as they choose. In addition, companies employ nutritionists with specialized education to design the diets the birds are fed. Each diet is specific for the age and type of birds being housed.

And, the caretakers are able to walk through the houses and easily observe the birds to confirm that they have ready access to feed and water. This includes inspecting the height adjustments of the equipment for ease of access at the various ages of the birds as well as confirming that all of the systems are functioning properly. Most companies require that this inspection be done at least twice a day.

2. Freedom from discomfort – by providing a suitable environment including shelter and a comfortable resting area.

One of the reasons that modern housing has developed is so that the birds can be provided a controlled atmosphere to protect them from extremes in environment as well as provide shelter and comfortable resting areas. In the United States, meat-type
chickens are never in cages but rather are
allowed to roam free in large barns. These barns
have dirt floors that are covered with a soft
bedding material. This bedding material provides
a soft resting area for the birds. In addition,
the dirt floors and bedding material help keep
the house dry by allowing drainage of any
spilled water.

Houses are designed to provide ventilation so that
birds have good quality air. Houses with curtains
are no longer the standard for providing the best
possible environment for the birds. The newest
barns are equipped with systems that provide
“tunnel ventilation.” Properly ventilated housing
is essential for maximum performance and bird
comfort. These systems are designed to remove
heat and excess moisture while minimizing dust,
odors and the buildup of potentially harmful
gases such as ammonia and carbon dioxide.

In addition, the barns are sized so that there is
room for all birds to rest and perform normal
activities. The size of the barn determines the
number of birds that can be placed in it to
achieve the best conditions. If the average size of
the birds desired at market increases, the number
of birds that can be placed in the barn decreases.
It is important that at least the minimum amount
of space per bird is maintained so that every bird
can sit at the same time, have access to food and
water and be able to move around freely.

3. Freedom from pain, injury and disease –
brouter birds are vaccinated at appropriate ages
to protect them from a variety of common dis-
esases. In addition, the conditions in the barns are
maintained so as to minimize exposure to other
potential disease organisms. Modern farms have
strict biosecurity policies that limit access to the
birds from pests such as rodents, wild birds,
household pets and humans. Visitors are required
to wear special outer clothing provided to prevent
their exposing the animals to disease organisms.
In addition, visitors are required to stay away
from other poultry for 48-72 hours before being
allowed on modern poultry farms. This includes
necessary visitors such as delivery personnel,
utility repairmen and even veterinarians.

In addition, the design of the barn facilitates
easy observation of the birds so that they can be inspected for injury or signs of disease. The
farmer is able to walk through the entire house
by making three or four paths through the length
and see virtually every bird. Most farmers do this
at least once each day, and many visit their birds
two or more times a day. In the event that an
injured bird is observed, it can be easily selected
for appropriate treatment.

Specialized feeding and watering equipment is
used so that the potential for contamination from
the birds is minimized. This equipment also
be used to distribute treatments when
ecessary by adding them to the feed or water.

4. Freedom to express normal behavior by
providing sufficient space, proper activities
and company of animals of like kind –
chickens are flock animals which means they like
to be in close proximity to other birds. They will
“huddle” together even when there is plenty of
room to spread out. This is a normal behavior.
In addition, the house size and stocking density
provide room for normal behavior appropriate to
the breed and bird age. “Dust bathing” is another
natural behavior of chickens. The loose bedding
material not only provides a soft surface for the
birds, it can be used for dust bathing.

5. Freedom from fear and distress by ensuring
conditions that avoid mental suffering –
the most common and easiest measure of fear in
chickens is by their responses such as attempts
to escape, defensive behavior, freezing in place
or immobility and vocalization. Other measures
require taking of blood so that specific chemicals
can be measured or measuring heart rate. Fear
reactions by chickens are commonly seen in the
presence of predators such as hawks or fox. Loud,
sudden noises also seem to startle them and
may be a temporary source of fear as they often
“freeze” in reaction to these noises.

Humans are also a source of fear in chickens.
For this reason, walking through the house to
inspect the birds, beginning on the first day, has
the effect of acclimating them to humans and
thus reducing fear. The walking should be done
at a steady pace and at approximately the same
speed throughout their lives as dramatic changes
in human behavior can produce fear.

The modern system did not just happen but
rather is the result of 50+ years of advances in knowl-
edge and technology which allowed the production
of large numbers of animals on relatively small amounts
of land that has little use in other forms of agricul-
ture. The final result is the production of an abun-
dant, affordable and safe food supply. In 1950 a
single farmer could produce enough food for about
30 people, and today, with all of the improvements,
that farmer can produce enough for 150 people.

YVONNE VIZZIER THAXTON, PhD, is professor and director
of the Center for Food Animal Wellbeing at the Center of Excel-
Ience for Poultry Science, University of Arkansas, Fayetteville.
KAREN CHRISTENSEN, PhD, is associate professor and Exten-
sion poultry specialist at the Center of Excellence for Poultry
Science, University of Arkansas, Fayetteville. F. DUSTAN
CLARK, DVM, PhD, is professor and Extension veterinarian with
the University of Arkansas Division of Agriculture and associate
Poultry Center director of Extension at the Center of Excellence for
Poultry Science, University of Arkansas, Fayetteville.

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