

Preamble

Edgar's Mission welcomes the opportunity to provide a submission into the Australian Animal Welfare Standards and Guidelines for Poultry.

Edgar's Mission is a world-renowned not-for-profit organisation dedicated to the protection of farmed animals. Our sanctuary, based in Lancefield, Victoria, offers refuge to orphaned, abandoned, neglected and surrendered farmed animals. Established in 2003, the sanctuary has been directly involved in the rescue, rehabilitation and rehoming of several thousand farmed animals. Throughout this time, Edgar's Mission has had the unique opportunity to gain an understanding of intensive animal industries and their impacts on animals, the wider community and the environment.

The largest number of animals taken in by Edgar's Mission have been poultry. This has placed our organisation a position to witness, firsthand, the impacts modern poultry production has had on many of these animals.

Introduction

In response to this review, we note that it is long overdue, with the current voluntary codes now 15 years old. Since the inception of these codes, and the consultation period prior to them, much has advanced.

In view of this, any revised code needs to reflect: the contribution of modern science in understanding avian sentience and the behavioural needs of birds, consumer expectations, human health, environmental stability and alternatives to poultry products. To this end, the seven options listed in the RIS are unable to meet all these criteria. Edgar's Mission proposes an eighth option which does. This option acknowledges that the industry cannot change practices overnight, suggesting a phase out period be implemented for farmers to transition out of the industry, similar to what has occurred in the closure of those involved in the motor industry in Australia. Throughout history, societal progress has been marked by the end of industries no longer deemed sustainable, humane or accepted in the public domain.

Reasoning

Industrialised food systems have reduced animals to production units, and none more so than the poultry industry. By far, chickens count as the most populous animal on the planet, and so too they suffer most at the hands of humans. This suffering extends throughout their short and often impoverished lives: in most instances they have no access to fresh air or the ability to express natural behaviours. Selective breeding predisposes them to painful joints (in the case of broiler chickens), brittle bones (in the case of layer hens) and other chronic illnesses, which are compounded by systemic cost-effective, yet often careless, handling practices and transport in the period leading up to, and including, their stressful deaths - with maximising profits the driving force. For waterbirds such as ducks (in particular Pekin Ducks), economics and expediency deny them means to satisfy one of their most instinctive behaviours of dabbling in water for hygiene and "happiness".

The animal welfare issues associated with poultry production are well documented. Indeed, some have even been discussed in the supporting papers of the consultation and

additionally Farmed Bird Welfare Science Review (Agriculture Victoria, October 2017) and The Welfare of layer hens in cage and cage free housing systems (RSPCA August 2016) to name just a few. To this end, no amount of regulation can address these problems and other problems inherent in poultry production and offer humane outcomes for these animals.

Acknowledging that some of the options listed in the RIS will create improved states of welfare for some poultry, these are not sufficient to negate the harms animals would still be exposed to. For example, while true free range options for layer hens will give these birds opportunities to satisfy natural behaviours, nothing ameliorates the deleterious impacts of their breeding. Physiological traits that have been deliberately geared towards maximum egg production cause a range of health issues that ensure, even in sanctuary settings such as ours, these birds will not live as long as their more robust cousins, who have not undergone such selective breeding. It is not our belief alone that in an industry that is driven by economics it is cost prohibitive for these birds to be treated as individuals where they can be humanely collected, transported, unloaded and slaughtered in manners not to cause stress and suffering to animals. So too we hold the belief, founded in science and compassion, that it is not possible for the birds to be kept in states of good health, receiving proper nutrition where their psychological wellbeing is maintained, on a cost-effective basis.

Over the last fifty years or so, and most certainly in modern times, society is reconsidering their relationship with animals, and importantly, how they deserve to be treated. With more and more households adopting chickens as pets, these animals are moving in people's hearts and minds from "food" to "friends". This code review represents a golden opportunity to continue this important discussion where opinions (which inform legislation) can better reflect facts and sound science rather than tradition, expediency and taste. As an organisation dedicated to the protection of farmed animals, we cannot support or condone practices that result in the killing of these animals (whose cognitive ability rivals that of cats and dogs), other than on humanitarian grounds.

Given the many challenges associated with the production of meat, including protecting the environment, maintaining animal welfare, food security and ensuring human health, growing numbers of consumers are looking for other means to satisfy their protein needs and taste buds. Such exploration is being reflected in the popularity of, and growing interest in an ever-growing number of alternate poultry products. Of recent times, there has been both mounting interest and investment in meat alternatives, in particular "clean meat"—creating animal products without animals at all or directly from animal cells (without causing harm to live animals). Some of the world's richest and most influential people, including Bill Gates and Richard Branson, have already heavily invested in clean meat start-up companies. So too Cargill, known for being one of the world's largest producers of meat, and Tyson Foods Inc. (a United States food producer, primarily animal based) are now investing in non-animal based protein foods.

Conclusion

In terms of providing input to the consultation, Edgar's Mission proposes option H. This option includes a short-term phase-out of battery cages (5 years) and a ten year (or less)

phase out of poultry production, along with the immediate banning of the most egregious animal practices of pinioning, devoicing, castration and debeaking (unless on veterinary grounds and performed by a skilled veterinarian) along with standards to prohibit the forced moulting by the removal of food and water (and in the case of geese, banning of induced moulting by the plucking of breast feathers). Complementing the banning of certain procedures, we also propose the swift introduction of in-ovo sexing, optimal lighting for wellbeing, provision of water for ducks to facilitate dabbling along with hygiene measures to ensure biosecurity, and the requirement to provide environmental enrichment sufficient for all poultry including nests, perches and litter for all chicken layers in cage and non-cage systems and the provision of nest boxes for meat and laying chicken breeder birds along with nest boxes for duck and turkey breeder birds. This option further includes the immediate installation of CCTV cameras in slaughterhouses under the watchful eye of accountable veterinarians and regular, audited inspections of poultry establishments to ensure compliance.

Edgar's Mission believes that the current and future ability of non-animal based food industries to satisfy the need for, and provide safe, tasty and nutritious alternatives to poultry products is most tangible and profitable. The benefits of poultry-alternatives weigh positively against the costs of poultry products; they do not involve animal suffering or death, cause environmental degradation, consume a disproportionate amount of resources nor pose a threat to human health. In light of the current and proven understanding of harms and societal concern for the welfare of animals, poultry-alternatives must be embraced.