

Welfare of turkeys

In 1992 the Farm Animal Welfare Council (FAWC) was asked by the Agriculture Departments of Great Britain to consider the welfare of turkeys being reared for the table and to make recommendations to Ministers. Accordingly a FAWC Working Group was set up; taking evidence from numerous interested parties, considering the technical literature and visiting a number of turkey production sites.

The report of this working group covers all aspects of the welfare of turkeys being produced for the table, from their arrival on the rearing farm to their departure to the slaughterhouse. This includes small-scale on-farm slaughter, transport to and around the farm, and loading and unloading; but not the large-scale commercial transport from farm to slaughter point.

There are some 51 suggestions to improve the welfare of the farmed turkey. Nine of these would need changes in legislation; 24 suggest that alterations should be made to the 1987 *Codes of Recommendations for the Welfare of Livestock: Turkeys*, made under the Agriculture (Miscellaneous Provisions) Act 1968; and the other 18 are of a more general nature.

There is little doubt that if the majority of these suggestions are implemented there would be an improvement in the welfare of turkeys in the UK.

Since this report was published in January of this year, there has been concern expressed by several animal protection societies who felt that some of the recommendations in the Report may be compromising the 'five freedoms' – FAWC's own philosophy of approach to animal welfare. For example it is proposed that producers should be allowed to stock in excess of existing recommendations in the current turkey welfare codes. FAWC did not, seemingly, locate any scientific evidence concerning the effects of stocking density on behaviour, and it appears that they based the recommendation that turkeys may be given less space, on their field observations that some birds, overcrowded in the Code sense, 'made use of shared space to stretch, wing flap and squat.' These observations may indeed be true, but any suggestion by the welfare lobby that animals should be given more space is usually met by the demand for quantified scientific evidence to show that behaviour and/or welfare would be improved by any such change.

Many people believe that one of the main underlying causes of welfare problems in turkeys is the overgrowth of the bird. It has been argued that many of the present commercial strains have such a potential for growth that, given reasonable nutrition, they become 'too large for their own good'. Not only must the breeding stock be assisted to reproduce, the table birds, in the later stages of their growth period, are in danger of being so heavy that their legs are not able to carry them without injury or distress. It may be that we will, in the future, have to accept slower growing (smaller? economically less viable?) birds or at least start to breed for robust, 'self-standing' characteristics in the present commercial stock. This growth issue does not seem to have been directly addressed in the FAWC investigation.

In spite of these criticisms, this substantial Report gives a good overall look at the welfare of turkeys being reared for the table; it makes many sensible suggestions and is essential reading for all those in any way concerned with the welfare of this particular class of bird.

Report on the Welfare of Turkeys. Farm Animal Welfare Council (FAWC) (1995). Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food: London. 42pp. Paperback. Obtainable from FAWC, Block D, Government Buildings, Hook Rise South, Tolworth, Surbiton, Surrey KT6 7NF, UK.