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Democracy Dies in Darkness

USDA plan to speed up poultry-processing lines could increase risk of bird abuse

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Nearly 1 million chickens and turkeys are unintentionally boiled alive each year in U.S. slaughterhouses, often because fast-moving lines fail to kill the birds before they are dropped into scalding water, Agriculture Department records show.

Now the USDA is finalizing a [proposal](#) that would allow poultry companies to accelerate their processing lines, with the aim of removing pathogens from the food supply and making plants more efficient. But that would also make the problem of inhumane treatment worse, according to government inspectors and experts in poultry slaughter.

USDA inspectors assigned to the plants say much of the cruel treatment they witness is tied to the rapid pace at which employees work, flipping live birds upside down and shackling their legs. If the birds are not properly secured, they might elude the automated blade and remain alive when they enter the scalding tank.

Over the past five years, an annual average of 825,000 chickens and 18,000 turkeys died this way, USDA public reports show, representing less than 1 percent of the total processed. Government inspectors assigned to the plants document these kills, which are easily spotted because the birds' skin becomes discolored.

“One of the greatest risks for inhumane treatment is line speed. You can't always stop the abuse at these speeds,” said Mohan Raj, a British-based poultry-slaughter expert who helps advise the European Food Safety Authority. “It's so fast, you blink and the bird has moved away from you.”



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The proposal being finalized by the USDA would revamp inspections in poultry plants and increase the maximum line speed — to 175 birds per minute from 140 in chicken plants and to 55 per minute from 45 in turkey plants.

Department officials, who plan to submit a final version of the regulations to the White House for approval, say they do not think the humane handling of poultry will be compromised as the new rules are rolled out across the country.

USDA officials stress that the new system could reduce food-borne pathogens, including salmonella, by using government inspectors more effectively. Officials say salmonella rates have fallen at plants in a pilot program using the new approach. But in a report last month, the Government Accountability Office questioned the validity of the USDA's findings, saying the department's analysis was based on incomplete and antiquated data.

The new rules would apply to what is called the “evisceration” segment of poultry processing, in which dead birds are cleaned, bruised meat is chopped off and food safety checks are conducted. It does not apply directly to the slaughtering process. But if plants wish to boost production by speeding up the processing of birds, more would have to be slaughtered.

More than two dozen chicken and turkey plants have adopted the new inspection procedures, including the faster line speeds, under the 15-year-old pilot program run by the USDA called the Hazard Analysis and Critical Control Point-based Inspection Models Project (HIMP). The new approach also involves replacing about 40 percent of government inspectors with company employees.

Inspectors and animal-welfare activists say the proposed staffing changes would make poultry more vulnerable because fewer government inspectors would be positioned along the line, where they can flag birds that have suffered abuse, including excessive broken bones and improper kills.

Birds that have been boiled alive can be identified by the cherry-red color of their skin, which results because their bodies were not drained of blood during slaughter. Birds that died this way must be discarded, because their meat is saturated with blood and can breed bacteria or disguise the presence of disease.

Philip Derfler, deputy administrator of the USDA’s Food Safety and Inspection Service, said the department thinks a roving government inspector, who is given latitude under the proposal to move up and down the processing line, would be better able to spot abuse. Also, Derfler said, the USDA has stepped up humane-handling enforcement in poultry plants in recent years and is preparing to post inspection reports on its Web site when plants are found in violation.

“There is some basis that people might say that the increased line speed in HIMP plants might adversely affect the humane handling of the birds, and we think that’s totally wrong,” Derfler said. “We think with the various things we have done in the HIMP system, we think if anything, it is at least as good as the current system, maybe better.” He said inspectors working in pilot plants over the past 15 years have not seen worse abuse than at other plants.

On slaughter lines across the country, workers shackle the legs of live chickens and turkeys to hang them in place on the processing line before they are electrically stunned and a blade slices their necks.

If they are not shackled or stunned properly, the blade can miss its mark and live birds are dunked into scalding water used to help defeather them. Researchers say the resulting death is far more painful for the birds than if they are properly incapacitated and their necks cut.

"They are literally throwing the birds into the shackles, often breaking their legs as they do it," said Charles "Stan" Painter, a federal poultry inspector and chairman of the National Joint Council of Food Inspection Locals. "They are working so fast, they sometimes get just one leg in the shackles. When that happens, the chickens aren't hanging right. . . . They don't get killed, and they go into the scald tank alive."

Citations and violations

Unlike cows, pigs and most other mammals, birds are not protected under the federal Humane Methods of Slaughter Act. Many of the practices common in poultry plants would be prohibited if birds were covered by the act, including the shackling of conscious birds and bone breaking that often occurs during the process, legal experts said. Boiling a bird alive would be an "egregious" violation. (Plants that kill mammals this way or repeatedly fail to make animals "insensible to pain" before shackling, stunning and slaughtering may face criminal charges.)

USDA inspectors can cite a plant for inhumane handling of poultry under the terms of the Poultry Products Inspection Act if they see mistreatment that renders some or all of a bird unfit for human consumption. When inspectors cite a plant, they can order immediate corrective action, including stopping the line until the problem is fixed.

USDA records, obtained by the animal welfare groups Animal Welfare Institute and Farm Sanctuary, describe a variety of reasons that poultry plants have been cited for violating provisions of that act. More than 35 percent of the citations obtained between January 2011 and July 2012 were for birds being boiled alive. An additional 10 percent were for instances when live birds were removed from the line because their necks were not properly cut — by the automated blade or by a backup worker assigned to cut necks when the equipment fails to — before entering the scald tank.

In some citations, inspectors attributed the abusive treatment to line speeds.

At a Pilgrim's Pride chicken plant in Georgia, for example, an inspector described being unable to stop a stream of live birds from being boiled to death.

"I was unable to safely position myself to remove the birds at rapid line speed before entering the scalding," the inspector said in the report. "I proceeded to observe the automatic and backup killer and noticed there were numerous amounts of birds missing the automatic knife and the backup killer was not able to keep up."

A spokesman for Pilgrim's Pride, Cameron Bruett, said he could not comment for this article, because the company was barred from making public remarks ahead of announcing its quarterly corporate earnings at the end of this month. He referred questions to the National Chicken Council, an industry group.

In a statement, council spokesman Tom Super said the industry considers “the welfare of the birds the top priority.” He said poultry companies “will take corrective action when they are not in compliance” with USDA directives and industry guidelines relating to animal welfare.

A ‘very uneven’ process

When the slaughtering process works properly, birds are rendered unconscious before their necks are cut and their bodies are dropped in the scalding tank. This is often achieved by running the birds’ heads through an electrified water bath to stun them.

But the low voltage used — about half of what is required in the European Union — and the high speed mean the birds sometimes do not lose consciousness, according to several poultry-slaughter experts and recent academic studies.

“It’s very uneven,” said Raj, the slaughter expert and a veteran researcher at the University of Bristol’s School of Veterinary Sciences. “It’s nearly impossible to get the same current to move through each bird, especially at high speeds.”

When the birds are not properly stunned, they attempt to right themselves. As they struggle, they lift their necks, which can cause the blade to miss, leaving them alive as they enter the boiling water.

For years, the Animal Welfare Institute, the Humane Society of the United States and other groups have petitioned the poultry industry to adopt another method that causes birds to lose consciousness, called controlled atmospheric stunning, which uses carbon dioxide or another blend of gases.

About 40 percent of poultry plants in the E.U. use this method. In the United States, many turkey plants use this system, but just a few of the more than 200 chicken plants do.

The USDA’s humane-handling enforcement coordinator, Lucy Anthenill, said that the department does not have legal authority to require that chickens be stunned before slaughter in chicken plants but that all federally inspected plants have such a system in place.

Isabel Arrington, a veterinarian and scientific adviser with the USDA, said the department considers electrified and gas stunning to be humane provided the systems are properly run and maintained.