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November 13, 2003

FSIS Docket Clerk
Docket #99-017P
USDA, Food Safety and Inspection Service
Room 102
Cotton Annex, SW
Washington, DC 20250-3700

99-017P
99-017P-4
Gene Bauston

RE: Classes of Poultry; Proposed rule [Docket No. 99-017P]

To Whom It May Concern:

The following comments are submitted on behalf of Farm Sanctuary in response to the *Federal Register* notice of September 29, 2003 (Vol. 68, pp. 55902-55905), concerning a proposed rule change in the definition of poultry classes. Farm Sanctuary is a national non-profit organization dedicated to fighting agricultural abuse of animals.

The proposed rule change would lower the age definitions for six classes of poultry: Cornish game hens from the current 5 to 6 weeks to less than 5 weeks; broiler-fryer chickens from under 13 weeks to less than 10 weeks; roaster chickens from 3 to 5 months to less than 12 weeks; capon from under 8 months to less than 4 months; fryer-roaster turkeys from under 16 weeks to less than 12 weeks; and young turkeys from under 8 months to less than 6 months. According to the *Register* notice, the Food Safety and Inspection Service and the Agricultural Marketing Service determined that the current poultry class definitions “did not reflect today’s poultry characteristics nor [sic] current industry practices” and that the definitions should be revised to ensure that labels for poultry products are truthful and non-misleading.

Farm Sanctuary supports a “no action” alternative in this case and opposes the proposed rule change on the basis that it is largely unnecessary. Of the six definitions slated for revision, four are completely accurate as currently written because they already include the word “under,” indicating that the age will be less than the maximum stated. If a change is to be made, it should be limited to revising the Cornish game hen and roaster chicken definitions to make them consistent with the other poultry classifications. For example, Cornish game hen could be redefined as “under 6 weeks” and roaster chicken as “under 5 months.”

Farm Sanctuary also opposes the proposed redefinition of poultry classes because it sanctions and promotes abnormally rapid growth in poultry, a practice that compromises animal welfare

and public health. Instead of encouraging a continued increase in growth rates, the USDA should be doing all in its power to halt and even reverse this dangerous trend.

Growing Bigger, Faster

The use of genetic breeding techniques over the past century has shortened the period of time required for birds to reach market-ready weights. The birds are also significantly heavier at slaughter. This transition has been dramatic, as illustrated in the following tables showing live weights and age at slaughter for turkeys (Table 1) and broiler chickens (Table 2).

Table 1. Average Live Weights of US Tom Turkeys, 1966 to 2002¹

| Report <u>Year</u> | Live Wt Lbs <u>at 18 Weeks</u> | Age Days <u>to 35 Lbs</u> |
|-----------------------|-----------------------------------|------------------------------|
| 1966 | 17.6 | +220 |
| 1975 | 21.3 | 194 |
| 1985 | 23.0 | 175 |
| 2002 | 32.2 | 136 |

Table 2. Average Live Weights of US Broiler Chickens, 1925 to 2005²

| Report <u>Year</u> | Average <u>Live Weight</u> | Age in <u>Days</u> |
|-----------------------|-------------------------------|-----------------------|
| 1925 | 2.2 | 112 |
| 1955 | 3.3 | 70 |
| 1985 | 4.2 | 49 |
| 2005 | 5.4 | 45 |

While the USDA and the poultry industry refer to genetically engineered growth as an “advancement,” serious complications have resulted. In writing about turkey growth, Dr. Peter Ferket of North Carolina State University notes, “[I]t is difficult for commercial operations to capture the full genetic potential for growth rate because of various management and disease challenges associated with intensive production systems.”³ In fact, in responding to a 2001 survey, poultry farmers identified the following problems in their flocks: early mortality, coronavirus, pneumonia, *E. coli* infections, airsacculitis, cannibalism and aggressive behavior, leg problems, and high incidence of late mortality.⁴ Many, if not all, of these problems are caused or exacerbated by rapid growth.

Animal Welfare Impacts

The rapid growth rate of today’s poultry is detrimental, in part, because its effects are not uniform throughout the body. Muscle grows much faster than bone and, as a result, at some point, the birds’ legs cannot support their abnormally heavy bodies.⁵ Lameness or leg weakness due to rapid growth is a serious health and welfare problem affecting modern broiler chickens.⁶

Furthermore, Kestin et al note that a large portion of leg weakness in broilers “is related to the rapid juvenile growth rate.”⁷

Leg weakness and deformities cause pain and difficulty walking in commercial poultry. Their legs buckle under the weight of heavy bodies, and in the most serious cases, the birds cannot walk at all. Disabled birds may not be able to reach food and water, and they may be trampled by other birds and then come in contact with the corrosive fecal matter that accumulates on the floor of a broiler house.⁸

To our knowledge, the prevalence of lameness and the related health and welfare problems among U.S. poultry has not been researched. However, a study in the United Kingdom found that 26 percent of broilers suffered from significant leg weakness, and a study of Danish poultry reported that 30 percent of the birds had serious walking problems, 57 percent had an orthopedic condition known as tibial dyschondroplasia, and 42 percent suffered from foot-pad burns.⁹ A predicted increase in the growth rate will result in further deterioration in walking ability.¹⁰

The hearts and lungs of commercial birds also have difficulty keeping pace with their overgrown bodies. Millions of chickens and turkeys die each year from heart failure and other cardiovascular problems prior to slaughter. One particular cardiovascular condition attributable to rapid growth is ascites, or pulmonary hypertension syndrome. Ascites is an accumulation of fluid in body cavities caused by the inability of a bird’s vascular system to meet the excessive oxygen needs of the rest of the body.¹¹ It has been estimated that ascites costs the U.S. poultry industry more than \$100 million a year in premature deaths and carcass condemnations at slaughter.¹²

Rapid growth rates may also contribute to disease outbreaks and high mortality among intensively raised poultry. A study reported in *Poultry Science* evaluated the response to an induced *E. coli* infection of four breeding chicken lines – three slow-growing lines and one fast-growing commercial line. The three slow-growing lines had mortality levels of 8 to 20 percent as a result of the *E. coli* infection, while the mortality among the commercial line exceeded 40 percent. In addition, by the end of the study, the commercial broilers had grown to be 38 percent heavier than the other birds.¹³

Public Health Impacts

Birds are so stressed by unnaturally fast growth and poor housing conditions that they are frequently dosed with antibiotics to prevent illness. Subtherapeutic levels of antibiotics are administered routinely in the feed and water of birds raised under intensive confinement. The Union of Concerned Scientists estimates 70 percent of all antibiotics produced in the U.S. end up being fed to poultry and other food animals for reasons other than treatment of disease.¹⁴

Despite widespread use of antibiotics, disease-causing pathogens are prevalent in poultry products sold in the U.S. In two studies conducted in 2002, almost half of chickens being sold in grocery stores nationwide tested positive for bacteria capable of causing serious illness and death in humans. *Consumer Reports* tested fresh chickens purchased in 25 cities and found that approximately half (49 percent) contained *Campylobacter*, *Salmonella*, or both. In the other

study, 18 percent of fresh chickens purchased in the Midwest by the Sierra Club tested positive for Salmonella, while 95 percent were contaminated with Campylobacter. Of ground turkey samples tested by the Sierra Club, 45 percent contained Salmonella.¹⁵

The Consumer Reports and Sierra Club studies also found that the bacteria strains present in store-bought poultry are often resistant to antibiotics. Of the chickens tested in the Consumer Reports study, 90 percent of the Campylobacter-tainted samples, and 34 percent of the Salmonella-tainted samples, were resistant to one or more antibiotic. In addition, 62 percent of the Campylobacter-tainted chickens purchased by the Sierra Club were resistant to at least one antibiotic.¹⁶

Food-borne pathogens represent a serious risk to public health in the U.S. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) estimates that every year in the U.S. nearly 2 million illnesses, more than 10,000 hospitalizations, and 100 deaths are caused by Campylobacter. Salmonella is responsible for 1.3 million illnesses, 15,000 hospitalizations, and more than 500 deaths.¹⁷ In 2002, the USDA Food Safety and Inspection Service issued voluntary recalls for more than 32 million pounds of poultry due to suspected bacterial contamination.¹⁸

Misleading the Public

The *Federal Register* notice claims that changes to the USDA's poultry classification are needed to prevent misleading the public. However, the notice fails to offer any examples of questions, concerns, or complaints raised in this regard, by consumers or others. Farm Sanctuary suspects that very few consumers are even aware of the official poultry definitions. We believe that consumers would be far more interested in learning that a large percentage of birds raised for food suffer from skeletal deformities, or that a majority of poultry products sold in this country are contaminated with potentially deadly bacteria.

Public opinion surveys have shown that most Americans share a concern for the manner in which farm animals are treated. Because of this concern, the food service industry as a whole, as well as individual corporations such as McDonald's and Burger King, are requiring that their suppliers meet certain animal welfare standards. Requirements specific to poultry are in the process of being instituted, and it is entirely possible that these criteria may eventually include some limitations on growth rates. Unfortunately, it has become necessary for consumers and the food service industry to apply the brakes to out-of-control poultry manipulation, something the USDA has been unable or unwilling to do.

Thank you for considering our comments on this issue.

Sincerely,



Gene Bauston, President
Farm Sanctuary, Inc.

¹Ferket P. Feb. 2002. Growing bigger, faster. *WATT PoultryUSA*.