On-Farm Slaughter of Large Poultry Flocks

SUMMARY

Birds kept for commercial purposes are usually transported to processing plants to be slaughtered for human consumption, but in certain situations whole flocks of poultry may have to be slaughtered on-farm. The main reason for this in the past has been to deal with outbreaks of infectious, notifiable diseases such as Newcastle Disease or Avian Influenza.

However, egg producers are now facing costs for the removal and disposal of hens at the end of their production cycle, causing farmers to explore the option of slaughtering on-farm for economic reasons.

This leaflet focuses on the slaughter or killing methods which can legally be used for the humane disposal of large poultry flocks on-farm. It aims to provide constructive, practical advice to maximise bird welfare.

Farmers must be aware of the animal welfare implications when killing large numbers of birds on-farm. Individuals involved must know the appropriate action to take in order to prevent birds from suffering unnecessarily.

Legislation

When slaughtering on-farm, there is a range of legislation of which you need to be aware. This is in place to safeguard bird welfare. Issues other than bird welfare are beyond the scope of this leaflet. Relevant welfare legislation is listed below:

Animal Welfare Act 2006
It is an offence to cause ‘unnecessary suffering’ to any animal.

The Welfare of Animals (Slaughtering or Killing) Regulations 1995 (WASK 1995)
It is an offence to cause ‘any avoidable pain, excitement or suffering to any animal’.

The Agriculture (Miscellaneous Provisions) Act 1968
It is an offence to cause any ‘unnecessary pain or unnecessary distress’ to any animal.

The Animal By-Products Regulations 2005 lists the permitted carcass disposal methods. It is important that you check with your Local Authority for suitable carcass disposal methods before proceeding with any method of on-farm slaughter or killing.
Options available

WASK '95 stipulates the methods allowed in the UK for the stunning and killing of poultry. These methods are:

1) **Electrical stunning followed by neck dislocation or bleeding** - this method is usually carried out using hand-held electrical stunning equipment. When correctly applied, electrical stunning will render the bird immediately unconscious and insensible to pain. A prompt, effective neck cut or dislocation must follow electrical stunning.

2) **Percussive stunning followed by neck dislocation or bleeding** - this should be carried out using the ‘Cash Poultry Killer’ (available from Accles & Shelvoke). Its use must be followed by neck dislocation or bleeding, except when used in an emergency or during disease control operations.

3) **Killing by electrocution** - currently no equipment exists for use on-farm, however this method has potential for the future.

4) **Killing by exposure to gas mixtures (only certain permitted gases)** - currently no equipment exists for use on-farm, however this method has potential for the future.

5) **Free bullet** - not suitable for on-farm killing.

6) **Neck dislocation or decapitation** - neck dislocation only is not recommended by the HSA for the killing of large numbers of birds, as it is difficult to guarantee a consistent and immediate effective stun.

* This method is impractical and, from a health and safety point of view, not advisable for the on-farm killing of large flocks of poultry.

The HSA strongly recommends electrical or percussive stunning, followed by bleeding or neck dislocation as the most practical and humane methods for routine killing of large poultry flocks on-farm. Systems for killing using gas mixtures or by electrocution may become available in the future.

Training

A slaughter licence is required for all the slaughter and killing methods listed above, apart from option 6 (neck dislocation or decapitation), unless used in an emergency or during disease control operations. For information on how to obtain a slaughter licence contact your local Defra Animal Health Office. The HSA recommends that anyone involved with the slaughter of poultry on-farm must undergo some form of training to ensure the highest animal welfare standards.

Further publications

*Emergency Slaughter video/dvd*  

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The Old School . Brewhouse Hill . Wheathampstead . Herts AL4 8AN . UK  
Tel: +44 (0)1582 831919  Fax: +44 (0)1582 831414  Email: info@hsa.org.uk  Website: www.hsa.org.uk  
Registered Charity No.209563

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