

Technical Note No 11

On-Farm Slaughter or Killing 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.

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Legislation

When slaughtering on-farm, under UK/EU legislation you have a legal obligation to ensure that ‘animals shall be spared any avoidable pain, distress or suffering during their killing and related operations’. Issues other than bird welfare are beyond the scope of this leaflet.

It is important that you check with your Local Authority for suitable carcase disposal methods before proceeding with any method of on-farm slaughter or killing.

Options available

The permitted methods for the on-farm stunning and killing of poultry in the UK 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. Legislation requires that for head-only electrical stunning a minimum current of 240mA must be applied to chickens, and 400mA to turkeys. 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 a non-penetrating, captive-bolt device such as the ‘Cash Poultry Killer’ (also known as the Cash Small Animal Tool; available from Accles & Shelvoke), or an equivalent device generating a similar, or greater, impact energy. Its use must be followed by neck dislocation or bleeding, except when used in an emergency or during disease control operations.
- 3) **Manual percussive blow to the head** – legislation only permits a manual percussive blow to the head on poultry up to 5kg live weight. In addition no person shall kill by a manual percussive blow to the head more than 70 animals per day. This method must only be used when there are no other methods available for stunning.
- 4) **Killing by exposure to gas mixtures (only certain permitted gases)** – a commercially-available mixture of argon and carbon dioxide can be used to kill large numbers of poultry on-farm using containerised gas units (CGUs). This service is available from established professional companies. Smaller units for routine culling by farm staff are also available. However, you must be aware of your legal obligations as the owner or keeper of the birds, which includes:
 - written notification to the Competent Authority, at least five days beforehand, of the intention to use gas mixtures to kill out flocks;
 - monitoring and recording critical parameters including, oxygen concentration and dwell times to demonstrate compliance with current legislation.

Whole-house killing of poultry by gas, where the building has been previously sealed, is only permitted when under the direct supervision of a veterinary surgeon.

- 5) **Free bullet weapons and shotguns** – these weapons are impractical and, from a health and safety point of view, not advisable for the on-farm killing of large flocks of poultry. However, their use by appropriately-trained and licensed personnel may be necessary under certain circumstances involving individual, free-ranging birds.
- 6) **Cervical dislocation** – cervical, or 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. EU and UK legislation only permits cervical dislocation on poultry up to 5kg live weight, but manual cervical dislocation is only permitted on animals of no more than 3kg live weight. In addition no person shall kill by manual cervical dislocation more than 70 animals per day. This method must only be used when there are no other methods available for stunning. A simple, hand-held device that facilitates cervical neck-dislocation in poultry is available – the Livetec ‘Nex’ is classed as a ‘mechanical neck dislocation device’.

Training

A slaughter licence is required for all the slaughter and killing methods listed overleaf, (apart from options 3 and 6), unless used in an emergency or during disease control operations. For information on how to obtain a slaughter licence contact your local Animal, Plant and Health Agency (APHA) 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.

Legislation and Publications

Council Regulation (EC) No. 1009/2009
OJ of the EU 2009

The Welfare of Animals at the Time of Killing (England) Regulations 2015
Defra 2015

Emergency Slaughter DVD
HSA 2004

The *Animal By-Products Regulations 2005* lists the permitted carcase disposal methods

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