A WELFARE AUDIT FOR THE BROILER INDUSTRY

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A welfare audit has been developed to help fulfill both the chicken meat industry’s and the community’s expectations of high levels of welfare associated with quality assurance (QA) for chicken meat production. It has been developed specifically focussing on conditions in SE Australia, but would require only minor modifications for use in other climatic zones and for use by the egg industry. QA programmes within industry predominantly focus on animal health and human hygiene and there was a need, coinciding with a more informed and demanding customer base, to expand these programmes to include animal welfare issues. Similarly, there will be a need in the future to include environmental audits into QA programmes. Broiler companies already provide information on animal welfare and growers/unit managers, in their daily tasks, already largely implement this information. The welfare audit documentation has put all this information together and added additional information from the literature and experts in Australia. One purpose of the audit documentation for broiler care is to provide some certainty for all staff involved, so that they, the company, consulting veterinarians, the public and any internal or external auditors are asking the same questions; thus all parties know in advance what questions will be asked.

The documents were developed, based on the HACCP approach, by a management group comprising representatives of commercial companies, farmer groups, animal welfare groups, and teaching and research organizations. To date, documentation has been prepared in separate booklets for the grower, hatchery, rearing and laying sectors of the chicken meat industry. By the end of the year 2000 documentation will have also been prepared for the transport and processing sectors. The completed documentation will represent the first comprehensive welfare audit for an animal industry.

Each booklet is comprised of audit questions and recording sheets, background information on the purpose of the questions and how the questions/practices relate to welfare and recording sheets for growers/unit managers to complete to help demonstrate compliance with the audit process. Although the booklets contain considerable information, every attempt has been made to keep the recording task, for the growers/unit managers, as simple and as short as possible. The audit questions include both critical questions, which are defined as those where “if something goes wrong the welfare of the birds is irrevocably damaged” and good practice questions which reflect the current state of knowledge and its practical implementation in the industry. Compliance can be at the level of the Code of Practice or at a higher standard that has targets higher than those in the Code of Practice; the higher standard is an achievable target for industry over the next five years.

It is anticipated that the audit documentation will fulfil several aims; most importantly, that of demonstrating high standards of animal welfare by providing documented evidence of high quality animal care and by identifying and monitoring equipment, animal problems and human resource issues associated with quality animal care. There are also a number of subsidiary aims, including improved awareness by industry personnel of the interactions between production and welfare and a recognition that welfare must be continually improved.

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