



6 October 2008

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Mercy For Animals
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Mr. Runkle:

You have asked me in my capacity as a professor and veterinarian to review video footage taken at a chicken egg production facility. For identification purposes, I am Emeritus Professor of Veterinary Medicine at the University of California. I have over 35 years of experience, much of it involving farmed animals including chickens.

The video I viewed depicted typical, although inappropriate, practices at battery facilities. Hens were crowded in wire cages so that the birds could not lie down or walk, spread their wings or rest without causing major disturbance to the rest of the birds in the cage. This demonstrated that cage size was insufficient for normal postural adjustments. The cages had wire floors, something that is known to cause injury to the hens' feet. Because there were tiers of cages, hens below each row of cages would be subjected to waste material from the hens above, something that is unhygienic. Some of the hens had badly damaged feathers, probably a consequence of the extreme crowding and lack of opportunity to properly maintain their plumage.

Many of the hens had what appeared to be serious injuries or other abnormalities to their vent areas. In some cases, this appeared to be due to tearing of the tissue or possibly cloacal rupture or prolapse. Some of the chickens may have been egg-bound. All these are painful conditions that would cause pain and suffering. Immediate veterinary intervention or euthanasia is necessary in order to minimize this. Because some of the conditions appeared to be relatively long-standing, it suggested that this was not being done.

Some of the hens had various swellings involving the head. From the video footage, the cause or welfare implications could not be determined in most cases. In at least one, however, the lesion involved the right eye or orbital region. This appeared to be consistent with substantial inflammation and was likely painful, warranting immediate treatment or euthanasia.

All the hens appeared to have been subjected to "de-beaking" or "beak trimming," which is done in an attempt to reduce injury caused by the hens picking at each other. The reason for the aggression, however, is largely due to the crowded conditions. The consequence for the hens in the video, typical for this type of mutilation, is that the beaks were malformed. This would make prehension of food very difficult. Preening, an important behavioral and health related activity, would be essentially impossible. In addition, because the beak is rich in nerves, the cutting of this tissue can result in neuromas. The latter are painful tumors caused by aberrant regrowth of the nervous tissue. This was evident in several of the birds in the video and probably was a source of constant discomfort.

There were several scenes in which a worker apparently attempted to kill chickens by twirling the body while holding onto the head. This is not a veterinary approved method of killing birds. Nor is such treatment likely to kill quickly in all cases and would cause considerable pain and suffering in the interim



even if the bird eventually succumbed. The video footage showed several live birds, some conscious, on piles of what appeared to be dead birds. If the method of "killing" that I observed was routine, then seeing these living birds would not be surprising. Although it cannot be proven from the video footage, it is likely that many of these living birds were in pain.

Some birds were trapped by the cage structures so that they could not move. In addition to the stress and suffering caused by this type of restraint, these individuals would also not be able to get food or water. This would add to their suffering. Such situations demand immediate intervention.

A few crippled hens were shown lying outside the cages. These hens did not appear to have had access to water or food. If they were being left there for more than a few hours, this would result in further suffering for them. Euthanasia or removal to a location where they could get proper care would mitigate the negative welfare of the situation.

Many dead birds were shown in the cages. Some of these clearly had died days to weeks before, as evidenced by the state of decomposition or mummification of the bodies. There was no way to determine from the video if the hens had died quickly or had experienced a slow and possibly painful death. It is feasible that some may have died of contagious conditions or have developed contagious opportunistic infestations during decomposition that could then have placed the other hens at risk. It is axiomatic that dead animals should be immediately removed from contact with living animals particularly under intense housing conditions such as battery cages in order to reduce the chance of contagion.

There is no question that the manner in which the chickens depicted in the video were treated was cruel by any normal definition of the word and resulted in suffering for the birds. The treatment of the hens violated norms of conduct with respect to animal welfare and veterinary care. None of this was necessary in order to pursue the purpose of the facility, which appeared to be the production of eggs. As such, it seems to me that this would constitute a violation of applicable animal cruelty laws.



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