P-05-1202 Ban the killing of day old chicks in Wales, Correspondence – Petitioner to Committee, 18.10.21

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Mr. Jack Sargeant, M.S.
Chair
Petitions Committee
Welsh Parliament
Cardiff Bay
Cardiff
CF99 1SN

18th October 2021

Dear Mr Sargeant

Re Petition: Ban the killing of day-old chicks in Wales

Thank you for the opportunity to reply to the letter sent to you by Ms Lesley Griffiths, Minister for Rural Affairs, on 28th September 2021 concerning the above petition.

The killing of unwanted day-old male chicks has been occurring for decades. As I have pointed out previously, in the U.K. alone every year 40 million male chicks are killed. They come into the world, they are sentient and aware, they look around and, shortly afterwards, they are destroyed. In Wales, Welsh Government agricultural statistics show that about 3 million laying hens are currently kept for egg production. For every laying hen in Wales, a male chick will have been destroyed.

Currently, laying hens kept in Wales are obtained (as female chicks) from large hatcheries in England (and potentially elsewhere). The U.K. egg industry states that these hatcheries use the most humane of the available alternatives for the destruction of the male chicks; that is, the use of the inert gas, argon, with a very low percentage of oxygen (higher oxygen percentages are problematic as it can cause chicks to recover). Even though this method is used, there are likely to be some welfare harms in the processing of the chicks, though the area is under-researched. Inevitably, the fact remains of the destruction of the sentient chicks as an unwanted by-product.

As previously stated, France and Germany are committed to banning the killing of day-old male chicks from the 1st January 2022. They will require that egg-producers use available egg-sexing technology. The French and German Governments have also raised the issue at the EU Council of Ministers.

Ms Griffiths refers to 'monitoring' progress and to the need for evidence on which to base decisions. Well, there has been a quite staggering amount of delay and postponement on addressing the killing of day-old chicks by the egg industry lasting decades and it is about time this changed.

With respect to evidence, there have now been many scientific reviews concerning potential ways of preventing the killing of day-old chicks. These have included investigation of the potential for affecting the proportion of male and female eggs laid through heat treatment, the potential for breeding 'dual purpose' chickens, such that the males could be used for meat while the females are used for egg-laying, and the potential to rear on male chicks for use in lower grade meat production. All of these have been shown to be either economically unviable or not practically feasible.

What has been shown to be a realistic and likely highly effective means of preventing the killing of day-old chicks is the sexing of eggs shortly after they have been laid. Then the male eggs can be removed before hatching. Several highly sophisticated methods have been developed to do this. The most promising include the use of something called near-infrared Raman spectroscopy. This involves removing a tiny portion of the eggshell without damaging the underlying membrane, shining a high intensity beam of quite long wavelength (near infra-red) light onto the blood vessels below the membrane surface, and then measuring the wavelengths of reflected light. These differ between male and female eggs. The process enables up to 95% accurate sexing of the egg, can be carried out within a few days of laying such that there are no harms caused to a developing embryo, and results in minimal hatching losses. The method can be administered very rapidly. (*A link to a paper describing this method is provided below).

A second method, which is already in commercial operation, uses a slightly different method taking minute samples from the egg shortly after laying and then analysing them using a specially designed mass spectrometer (which identifies substances according to their mass or weight) to identify biomarkers characteristic of male eggs. Again, this method achieves very high accuracy in identifying the sex of eggs and has minimal impact on hatching rates. The In-Ovo company has developed the technology such that it can be applied commercially at large scale. (**A link to an on-line webinar showing this system in operation is provided below).

The French and German Governments have not committed to banning the killing of day-old chicks lightly. They recognize that this is now something that is commercially viable and practical and will have enormous benefits including in terms of welfare and prevention of chick destruction, but also potentially in terms of future efficiency and cost. In the case of the French Government, there is a commitment to provide some industry subsidy to set up new technology.

I would hope that the Welsh Government can engage in urgent discussion with the Westminster Government to find legislative mechanisms by which the killing of male chicks can be ended in both England and Wales, and I should be grateful if you would press the Minister for Rural Affairs to do this.

Thank you.

David Grimsell
Petitioner
Welsh citizen

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https://journals.plos.org/plosone/article?id=10.1371/journal.pone.0192554

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https://www.newfoodmagazine.com/webinar/147070/solving-an-age-old-issue-in-the-poultry-industry/2/