



THE CENTER FOR
FOOD INTEGRITY

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Expert Panel Examines Video from Chicken Farm

KANSAS CITY, MO. (July 9, 2015) – The Center for Food Integrity’s (CFI) Animal Care Review Panel has examined undercover video reportedly obtained at a Delaware farm that houses chickens raised for meat – referred to as “broilers” in the poultry industry. CFI created this video review program to engage recognized animal care specialists to examine hidden camera video and provide expert perspectives for food retailers, the poultry industry and the media.

This expert panel was comprised of Dr. Bruce Webster, animal scientist, University of Georgia; Dr. Candace Croney, animal scientist and ethicist, Purdue University; and Dr. S. F. Bilgili, poultry scientist and veterinarian, Auburn University.

“The animal handling techniques seen in this video appear rough,” said Dr. Bilgili. “This producer needs to revisit some of its management/welfare programs to make sure farm employees are properly trained.”

“The methods of euthanasia seen in the video are troubling,” said Dr. Webster. “In a video like this, it’s impossible to tell the rate at which many of the things shown are happening or if we are looking at isolated incidents. I saw some situations where additional animal handling training would be beneficial for employees.”

The farm shown in the video was experiencing an outbreak of a respiratory disease known as “LT” when the video was obtained.

“LT is a viral disease that can cause serious health problems,” said Dr. Bilgili. “That would explain the scenes in the video where you see a significant number of dead birds. We try our best to prevent disease, but it happens. That’s why farms need to be vigilant on sanitation and biosecurity.”

“The fact that the flock was experiencing an outbreak of LT explains why birds were seen to have difficulty breathing,” said Dr. Webster. “This is not due to an air quality problem and would not be seen in a healthy flock. LT and other diseases happen, but companies try to prevent their occurrence. Disease is not a normal situation for broiler grow-out. In the case of LT, it is my experience that the company tries to dispose of the flock as soon as possible to minimize suffering and prevent spread of the disease.”

“Many aspects of this video are disturbing; however, given that there is clear upper respiratory illness occurring (at least at some point on this farm) it’s impossible to know if what we are viewing represents a consistent pattern or an isolated incident associated with disease outbreak that might account in part for the poor condition of the birds,” said Croney. “Regardless, there are instances of handling and other aspects of management shown that are unacceptable and indicative of a need for better training and oversight of the farm’s animal care staff.”



Video Review

A farm worker is seen dropping a stack of trays containing chicks then emptying them by tossing the birds onto the floor

Dr. Bilgili: This worker appears to be rushed and the way he's handling the chicks is not consistent with animal welfare guidelines. He's too rough placing the chicks, in my opinion. Chicks can handle the high drop, as long as they don't hit the equipment.

Dr. Webster: He dropped the crates more freely than I would prefer. Maybe he was carrying more trays than he should have been. These chicks are very resilient and they were landing on a soft surface. Although I would prefer he handle them a little more carefully, I doubt he seriously compromised the chicks' well-being. The video showed some injured chicks and suggested that these were incurred during this process. I don't believe that to be true from what I saw.

Dr. Croney: Whether or not chicks were actually hurt as a function of the rough handling shown is less relevant in my opinion than why they are being handled carelessly. Not only is this not in keeping with industry best practices, it shows an attitude that does not reflect the care and consideration these animals deserve, and that in itself is a significant concern when animal welfare is in question. There is a point early in the video where birds are being thrown. It seems clear that these are dead birds so that is not a welfare issue. Throwing live birds, as occurs both with chicks and with birds being loaded for transport later in the video, is not appropriate.

The video narrator states, "Crammed by the tens of thousands in windowless sheds, these birds never see the sun or breathe fresh air."

Dr. Webster: It's true there are tens of thousands of birds in a house like this and there is no sunlight but that doesn't compromise their welfare. As far as fresh air, these houses are well-ventilated.

Dr. Bilgili: This is an intensive production system and, yes, there are tens of thousands of birds in the houses like the one shown. These birds are being raised in a controlled environment that provides consistent and appropriate lighting, proper temperature and good air quality. The environment in a house like this is much preferable to the old-style houses that had open sides.

The video narration states chickens like the ones seen are "bred to grow at an unnaturally rapid pace" leading to birds being crippled under their own weight." Birds are seen flap their wings, apparently unable to stand.

Dr. Webster: Chickens today do grow much faster than they did long ago. Many farm animal species grow more rapidly because of their breeding. There can be leg problems associated with growth rate. This should be monitored closely and birds with problems should be culled and humanely euthanized to prevent suffering. Poultry breeding companies are



working hard on the genetics of leg soundness and rates of leg problems in broilers have declined considerably over the years.

Dr. Bilgili: These chickens are specifically bred for meat production. Is this unnatural? A Great Dane is much bigger animal than a Chihuahua because of breeding. We have many fruits and vegetables that are larger than they used to be because of selective breeding. We add attributes to plants and animals in order to provide the things consumers want.

It is possible for these chickens to be crippled by their own weight if the growth is not controlled. Since there are thousands of birds in a house like the one in this video, there will be few abnormalities. It's impossible to tell from isolated video clips why a few birds are flapping their wings and unable to get up.

Dr. Croney: While these chickens are bred to grow very rapidly as stated, birds should not have obvious deformities or show overt signs of struggling and suffering as indicated in at least one segment of the video. Quick and humane euthanasia should occur in those instances to prevent prolonged suffering. If that is not happening, it is a serious problem that warrants immediate attention.

The video's narrator states, "Many birds have painful infections and festering sores on their feet, caused by filthy, disease-ridden conditions."

Dr. Bilgili: It's to no company's or anyone's advantage to keep animals in "filthy, disease-ridden conditions" as the video states. If the foot condition shown in the video is a widespread problem then there may be bedding management issues but you can't tell from an isolated clip from this video.

Dr. Webster: The video showed a bird with foot pad dermatitis, not an infection. Dermatitis can be a problem if the material that covers the ground has too much moisture. The science is unclear on how much pain is associated with this condition. It's a welfare issue if a high number of birds in the house are experiencing it. You can't determine from this video if that's the case.

A chicken is shown apparently tangled in a rope. Another bird is seen apparently stuck in what is called a "poorly-designed feed trough."

Dr. Webster: I've never seen a chicken tangled in a rope like that, so I'm not sure what to make of this. Drinkers are sometimes suspended from a cord or rope, so maybe that's where it came from. I've also never seen a bird stuck in a feeder like this, so I think that must be pretty unusual, too.

Dr. Bilgili: I've been in and around commercial poultry production facilities for 35 years and I've never seen a chicken tangled in a rope like that. Can it happen? Sure, but it's not a common occurrence. Birds do get caught in a feeder like that but it's the farm employee's responsibility to make sure it doesn't happen. They need to be walking through the flock regularly to make sure things like this don't happen.



The narrator states, “At this farm, thousands succumb to sickness and disease. Many die from heath attacks or organ failure due to rapid growth.”

Dr. Webster: If there’s a disease outbreak, thousands of bird can, indeed, die. The video presents this as the normal situation for this farm. If that were the case, this farm would not be in business very long.

Dr. Bilgili: Industry data shows chickens today are healthier than they were 20 or 30 years ago. More chickens are living to market age than ever before. That doesn’t mean we don’t have issues with disease, as evidenced by the recent bird flu outbreak in the Midwest. But it’s not common.”

The video states, “(Birds) have their necks broken and spines crushed by workers.” A worker is seen swinging a chicken by the neck and another is seen apparently crushing a chick’s neck against the lip of a bucket.

Dr. Webster: Swinging a chicken by the neck is not an appropriate method of euthanasia. Cervical dislocation is an appropriate method but performing it on the edge of a bucket, as seen in the video, is not how one would be trained to do it. It is not clear from the video that proper cervical dislocation was being achieved using the edge of the bucket, and the possibility that cervical vertebrae were crushed in some birds cannot be precluded.

Dr. Bilgili: Workers need to be trained properly in cervical dislocation so it’s carried out properly. Swinging a chicken by the neck is not an approved method of euthanasia. Most farms have policies that call for annual training for all employees who would be conducting euthanasia.

Dr. Croney: Indeed, there is evidence that improper euthanasia technique is being used in some instances. This is a serious welfare issue that again reflects the need for better caretaker training, attitude and oversight.

The video narrator states chickens are, “allowed to suffer and slowly die without food, water or proper veterinary care.”

Dr. Bilgili: If this is happening, it’s neglect. But why would anybody routinely do this? It’s not to anybody’s advantage to let flocks of birds suffer. It just doesn’t make sense. All commercially-raised poultry flocks are under the direct or indirect supervision of poultry veterinarians.

Dr. Webster: Farm employees should be walking through the house on a regular basis to make sure there’s plenty of food and water and culling sick birds to prevent suffering. If this isn’t taking place then the farm isn’t being run properly. But, it can’t be determined from this video if that’s the case. National Chicken Council Animal Welfare Guidelines and other animal welfare audit programs, to which commercial poultry companies are subject, mandate the availability of veterinary care and a written flock health program implemented under the supervision of a poultry veterinarian.

In one segment of the video, a farm employee is seen elevating a row of water nozzles. The narrator notes this makes it impossible for smaller birds to access water.



Dr. Webster: It's normal practice to raise the water lines as the birds grow so they can drink from the proper angle. This prevents water waste and helps keep the litter that covers the floor dry. If a birds' health is compromised to the point they are too small to reach the waterer, they should be culled and humanely euthanized as part of normal practice mandated by company policy.

Dr. Bilgili: The nipple drinkers are raised to a level to accommodate the vast majority of birds. If a bird is too small to reach the drinkers it's probably unhealthy and should be humanely euthanized to prevent suffering.

In a closing scene, workers are seen loading birds for transport to a processing facility. The narrator describes birds as being "violently grabbed by workers and slammed into transport crates."

Dr. Webster: People who haven't seen this process before are probably surprised by it. The loading process was being conducted vigorously by the catch crew but didn't look violent to me.

Dr. Bilgili: Birds need to be handled gently during the loading process. They have to be caught manually and loaded into transport crates. Workers who do this should be trained and monitored. How this is done is up to the food companies. In this video, it looked like the employees were being a little rough. If I were auditing this company that would be a point of contention for me and I would want those employees to receive additional training in appropriate animal handling methods.

Dr. Croney: Handling birds quickly when loading them is common. Handling a mature bird by one wing, with little to no support of any other body part is unacceptable, painful, and puts the bird at risk for injury. Catching of birds, along with loading and transport are all causes of distress for birds. Careless and potentially injurious handling is simply inexcusable. Even if ethical concerns associated with the care of the animals were not a priority, this sort of lapse does not make sense from an economic standpoint and should be addressed. It reiterates the need for attention to worker training and following through on standard operating procedures in line with best practices for animal care and ethics. There isn't any point in a company having SOPs or ethics statements about animal care if there isn't going to be due diligence in ensuring the caretakers comply with them on a daily basis.

Animal Care Review Panel program

Video investigations at livestock and poultry farms have heightened public attention on animal care issues. In an effort to foster a more balanced conversation and to provide credible feedback to promote continuous improvement in farm animal care, CFI created the Animal Care Review Panel program.

The Panel operates independently. Its reviews, assessments, recommendations and reports will not be submitted to the poultry industry for review or approval. CFI's only role is to facilitate the review process and release the panel's findings.



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About the Experts

Dr. Candace Croney Purdue University

Dr. Candace Croney is a renowned expert in applied animal behavior, with an emphasis on animal learning, welfare and ethics. She is an associate professor of animal sciences at Purdue University. She has contributed to nationwide animal welfare efforts working with organizations such as the American Zoo and Aquarium Association and many others. She is on the Scientific Advisory Committee of the American Humane Certified program, and her research on farm animal cognition has been featured in national and international broadcast programs.

Dr. S. F. Bilgili Auburn University

Dr. Bilgili received his DVM degree from Ankara University, in Turkey; MS from Oregon State University, and Ph.D. from Auburn University, where he joined the Department of Poultry Science as a Professor in 1985. His responsibilities include developing and implementing a variety of extension/outreach and research programs in the areas of processing, food safety, meat wholesomeness and animal welfare. He has authored numerous articles in scientific and trade journals, and has been invited to speak at many national and international meetings. Dr. Bilgili serves on several industry and academic committees, and editorial review boards. He has served as the President of the Poultry Science Association and as a member of the Board of Directors of the Federation of Animal Science Societies.

Dr. Bruce Webster University of Georgia

Dr. Webster received his M.S. and Ph. D. from Canada's University of Guelph. His fields of specialization include Poultry Behavior, Animal Welfare, and Environmental Management. He is active in the study of animal behavior and welfare with the purpose of developing practical solutions to legitimate animal welfare concerns. Dr. Webster has contributed to a number of national committees addressing animal welfare and has served as chairman of the Animal Care Committee of the Poultry Science Association. He has provided advice on poultry care and welfare to food retailers and is a member of the International Society for Applied Ethology.

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