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Expert Panel Examines Video from North Carolina Broiler Farm

KANSAS CITY, MO. (Dec. 5, 2014) – The Center for Food Integrity’s (CFI) Animal Care Review Panel has examined video released this week from a North Carolina broiler farm. It is contained in a report produced by the group Compassion in World Farming.

CFI created the Animal Care Review Panel program to engage recognized animal care specialists to examine video and provide expert perspectives for food retailers, the poultry industry and the media. Panels include a veterinarian, an animal scientist and an ethicist to assure various perspectives are represented.

This expert panel was comprised of Dr. Patricia Hester, Purdue University; Dr. S.F. Bilgili, Auburn University; and Dr. Ruth Newberry, Washington State University and the Norwegian University of Life Sciences.

“In a large flock, there will be some birds with problems depicted in this video,” said Newberry. “Due to editing of the film, it is impossible to determine if the same birds are shown multiple times or if there are more widespread problems.

The incidence of these conditions should be documented by the farmer and the reasons should be investigated. Birds with incurable conditions should be detected at an early stage and euthanized immediately. It’s the humane thing to do.”

“The farmer needs to implement a twice-daily bird health monitoring program that includes culling and euthanasia of any age chicken that is suffering and in distress,” said Hester. “This includes the humane euthanasia of young chicks and older chickens with severe leg problems. It is obvious from the video that the farmer did not implement a rigorous culling program as there were older chickens in the flock that had been retained with severe leg problems. These lame chickens should have been humanely euthanized weeks earlier, yet the farmer allowed them to continue their suffering.

“The National Chicken Council’s welfare guidelines explicitly state that chickens with ‘stunted growth and obvious gait defects that limit an individual bird’s ability to move about or access feed and water for normal growth and development are humanely euthanized.’”

In the video report, chickens are shown with what appear to be broken or defective legs and beak deformities. Other chicks appear to be lethargic and sick with an inference that this is a typical, widespread condition.

Dr. Newberry: The sick and lethargic chicks shown in the video appear to be failing to convert from living off internal yolk reserves to eating solid food. This incurable condition occurs in some chicks of every hatch and

becomes evident within a few days after hatching. These chicks should be euthanized immediately to minimize suffering as they will, unfortunately, not survive.

Dr. Bilgili: Chicks with congenital or development defects, such as a twisted leg or a crossed-beak are expected given the fact that more than nine billion chicks are hatched annually in the U.S. Usually chicks with congenital defects are euthanized at the hatchery and never sent to the farms. Those that are missed or develop an anomaly after placement at the farm are supposed to be humanely euthanized by the farmer. This is an important part of the Animal Welfare Program that the farmer should have been trained on.

Many animal welfare programs require farmers to inspect their birds twice daily. If you walk into a chicken house and see birds that are sick, immobilized, with gait problems, etc., they should be humanely euthanized immediately, at any age. So, if what is shown in the video is correct, the farmer was negligent in his husbandry obligations.

Dr. Newberry: A crossed-beak is an incurable congenital disorder and the chick should be euthanized immediately to minimize suffering due to difficulty feeding. A few chicks in every hatch will have such disorders.

Dr. Hester: The leg was twisted and the broiler should have been humanely euthanized as soon as detected rather than retained in the flock and allowed to continue its suffering. A typical mortality pattern in broiler flocks is one percent the first week with a cumulative mortality of 3.8 percent at a market age of 47 days. The chicks that appear ill, like the one with the twisted leg, should have been humanely euthanized.

Dr. Newberry: A bird several weeks old is also shown with a severely deformed leg. This bird's deformity would likely have been evident within the first week after hatching. To minimize suffering, this bird should have been euthanized immediately when first seen, rather than allowing it to grow this big. Such deformities are, unfortunately, incurable in the context of chicken production.

The video's narrator says in a flock of 30,000 birds, it's not unusual for 1,000 to die prematurely.

Dr. Bilgili: This is a correct figure. Average mortality in the U.S. is about 3-4 percent, depending on the bird age. Nobody wants to lose animals, but we have come a long way in improving the health and well-being of broiler chickens.

Dr. Hester: The annual national mortality rate for broiler chickens has gradually declined over the years due to improved management, nutrition, biosecurity, and vaccination programs. National averages for broiler mortality to market age in 1925, 1965, and 2005 were 18, 6, and 4 percent, respectively. With breeding companies focusing on skeletal and cardiovascular health, it is hopeful that these mortality rates will continue to decline more in the future.

The farmer in the video says the birds spend a majority of their time squatting due to breast size and inability to stand.

Dr. Hester: The genetic stock of broilers shown in the video have been bred for rapid growth rate and increased breast meat yields. These modern strains of broilers are physiologically and genetically distant from their ancestor, the Red Jungle Fowl. Not only have their genetics and physiology changed, but the behavior of these rapidly growing lines of

broiler chickens has also been altered. The metabolic demands for rapid growth in broilers are huge, leaving less energy for activity. Broilers spend about 76 percent of their time sitting, 7 percent of their time standing idle on their feet, 3.5 percent standing preening, and 4.7 percent of their time standing eating. These chickens have enormous appetites feeding more than 50 times in a 24 hour period. They spend about 3 percent of their day drinking (Weeks et al., 2000, Applied Animal Behaviour Science 67: 111). So contrary to what the farmer states, the broilers are able to stand, but they do spend the majority of their time idling and sleeping in a sitting position. Genetically selecting broilers for rapid growth and broad breast has led to a more inactive chicken.

Dr. Bilgili: Compared to their free-roaming counterparts, housed-broilers spend less time looking for food (foraging) because feed and water is readily available/accessible continuously. Therefore, they spend most of their time resting.

The narrator says the litter that covers the floor of the barn is not changed between flocks and sometimes not for years which results in poor living conditions for the birds.

Dr. Hester: It is hard for me to assess the quality of the litter through a video. I need to feel and smell the litter and see the whole house. If there has been no disease outbreak and there are no issues with the quality of the litter, then the litter can be recycled over several flocks so as to minimize impact on the environment due to waste disposal. With recycled litter, the farmer is responsible for removing caked and wet areas of the bedding. The old litter is stirred in between flocks and generally 1 to 2 inches of fresh litter is top-dressed on the old litter before the arrival of the hatchlings.

Dr. Bilgili: The bedding is the farmer's responsibility. What type of bedding to use, how to maintain its quality and when to replace is the farmer's call. If the litter is wet or caked, then it's the farmer who is not maintaining a proper house environment (i.e., ventilation, water drinker management). The farmer can replace the litter after each flock with new bedding if he/she chooses. They save more money if they use it for a longer period. Keeping the same litter for a year is not at all common.

A bird is shown with little or no feathers on its underside. The narrator says this is due to the condition of the litter and the fact the bird spends a majority of its time squatting.

Dr. Bilgili: Broiler chickens today have a different feathering pattern. Also, because broilers rest with their breasts in contact with the bedding, this contact and associated friction can cause feather loss (similar to loss of hair on arms and legs of humans at contact points). The red color is probably due to contact irritation and/or inflammation from poor quality litter.

Dr. Hester: Inflamed red skin in the breast area with few feathers may be associated with too much contact with poor-quality litter. Lame birds spend more time lying down and I suspect that the chicken shown in the video was lame and should have been humanely euthanized to prevent its continued suffering.

The farmer says, "They don't want the birds active. They just want them sitting down and getting fat."

Dr. Hester: Improvements in feed efficiency have inconsequently led to more inactive chickens with more muscle as compared to the heritage lines of chickens. When these fast-growing genetic lines of chickens are given access to

pasture and their growth rate is slowed down through diet manipulation, they still spend the majority of their time sitting (Weeks et al., 1994. *Animal Welfare*, 3: 179).

Heritage lines or slow-growing chickens are more active than the rapidly growing genetic lines shown in the video. They require more feed to gain weight, produce a smaller amount of breast meat, and can take twice as long to reach market weight. It costs the farmer more to raise these types of broilers, therefore the meat is more expensive at the grocery store. Although more science is needed, it is also suspected that the carbon footprint or impact on the environment would be less favorable for the slower-growing chickens.

The farmer says his contract agreement with the company that provides the chicks he raises does not allow him to do away with the solid walls of the house to provide outdoor access to the chickens.

Dr. Hester: I believe the company that provides the chicks knows that there are disadvantages to outdoor access including higher mortality due to inclement weather, predators, and exposure to disease from other animals such as waterfowl potentially carrying the avian influenza virus.

The farmer says he would like to provide the chickens sunlight and fresh air.

Dr. Hester: For solid wall houses without exposure to outside natural light, artificial supplemental light is provided. Sunlight is not needed by the chickens to meet their vitamin D requirement because the feed is supplemented with adequate levels of Vitamin D. Fresh air is brought into the chicken house through the inlets of the ventilation system and the stale air removed through exhaust fans.

Dr. Bilgili: Birds naturally respond to light with increased activity, which is not desirable because they can pile up, climb over each other and can get injured. Sunlight also provides a high level of light intensity that not only increases activity but also creates bird migration in the house. Chicken houses are retrofitted with extensive ventilation and heating/cooling systems to better control air quality and bird comfort, similar to using an air conditioning system rather than opening the windows at our homes. All houses are equipped with ventilation systems to bring in fresh air, provided farmers do their jobs to manage the electronic controllers. If there is an air quality issue in a chicken house, it is usually attributed to the farmer's deficiency in husbandry.

The flock is described in the video as “a sea of panting birds,” inferring they are overheated.

Dr. Newberry: Chickens can withstand short periods of heat stress in the hottest part of the day. Panting is their method of cooling down as, unlike humans, they do not have sweat glands all over their body. With good insulation and proper ventilation, a chicken house will be cooler indoors than outdoors at the hottest time of the day.

Dr. Bilgili: Broilers pant to dissipate heat when overheated – either due to high ambient temperature and humidity or poor environmental control in the house. Again, the responsibility to respond to the needs of the flock lies with the farmer, who is on site 24/7 to make the appropriate changes in house environmental parameters (i.e., increasing the number or duration of fans operating, initiating evaporative cooling, fogging, etc.).

Dr. Hester: Panting is the major method used by birds to get rid of excess heat. Panting involves evaporative cooling. In humans, we lose heat through evaporative cooling by sweating. Increasing the ventilation may have helped reduce the incidence of panting in this particular broiler flock. Many farmers who raise broilers in hot climates use evaporative cooling pads or sprinklers along with high capacity ventilation to keep broilers cool during hot summer days.

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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