



Farm animals *information*

June 2008

The Slaughter of Food Animals

Over 40 million cattle, calves, sheep, pigs and over 850 million poultry are slaughtered every year in the United Kingdom for meat. The RSPCA is concerned that the conditions and way in which many of these animals are handled and slaughtered is far from satisfactory and is pressing for improvements.

HOW ARE ANIMALS SLAUGHTERED?

The slaughter process has two stages: stunning and sticking. The law (The Welfare of Animals (Slaughter or Killing) Regulations 1995) states that all animals, except those intended for consumption by specified groups that practice religious slaughter, must be stunned prior to sticking. Effective stunning causes an animal to lose consciousness, making it insensible to any pain until it is dead.

Sticking is a technical term used to describe the severing of the major blood vessels that supply the brain with oxygenated blood, ensuring that there is rapid blood loss and death.

HOW ARE ANIMALS STUNNED?

The law states that, with few exemptions, all animals must be stunned prior to being stuck. When performed correctly, stunning causes the animal to lose consciousness, which should not be regained before death occurs through application of further measures. There are three principle methods used to stun animals: captive bolt, electrical and stunning/killing of pigs and poultry using gas.

Captive bolt stunning is used on cattle, sheep and some pigs. With this method, a blank cartridge is used to force a metal bolt out of a gun and into the brain of the animal. The bolt does not kill the animal (stop the heart) but, if used correctly, causes the animal to lose consciousness immediately.

With **electrical stunning**, which is used on sheep, calves and pigs, a large pair of tongs is placed on either side of the animal's head and an electrical current passed through the brain. Unlike captive bolt stunning, which usually causes irreversible unconsciousness, electrical stunning causes temporary loss of consciousness. With some electrical stunning systems the current is also passed from the head to the shoulder, so the animal is stunned and the heart is also stopped, i.e. the animal is killed. Poultry may also be stunned by passing them through an electrically-charged water bath (see below).

Gas stunning/killing - the use of gas mixtures to kill pigs and poultry is a relatively new procedure. Pigs are exposed to mixtures of air and carbon dioxide (CO₂), with poultry exposed to mixtures of air and argon gas, until the animals are fully unconscious. The UK legislation states that animals must be killed, not just stunned, using this method.

WHAT IS STICKING AND HOW IS IT DONE?

In the case of mammals, once an animal has been stunned it is shackled by a hind leg and hoisted above the ground. The slaughterman sticks the animal, i.e. cuts the animal's throat, using a very sharp knife, severing the major blood vessels in its neck/chest – the carotid arteries and the jugular veins – ensuring blood loss is rapid. Once sufficient blood has left the body, the heart stops beating and the animal is technically dead.

HOW ARE POULTRY SLAUGHTERED?

Because of the enormous number of birds slaughtered each year (nearly 900 million) the process of slaughtering poultry is automated and everything is done by machine. In most cases, on arrival at the slaughterhouse birds are removed from the plastic crates in which they were packed at the farm, and hung upside down by their legs on metal

shackles on a moving conveyor belt. The bird moves along the production line to the stunning water bath. When the bird's head makes contact with the water, an electrical circuit between the water bath and shackle is completed. This stuns the bird. The conveyor belt continues to move along the production line to the neck cutter. This is a device through which the bird's head passes, cutting the major blood vessels in the neck. Those birds that miss the automatic cutter have their throats cut manually.

As stated above, some poultry are killed by exposure to certain gas mixtures. See RSPCA information sheet: '*The Slaughter of Poultry*' for more information.

WHAT ARE THE PROBLEMS WITH THE WAY ANIMALS ARE SLAUGHTERED?

For an animal to be slaughtered humanely, it is essential that it is properly stunned before it is stuck and that it does not regain consciousness before death supervenes. There is evidence to suggest there is a risk that some animals stunned electrically using tongs may regain consciousness before they die from loss of blood. There are two reasons for this:

- ❑ Insufficient electrical current passes across the brain to stun the animal
- ❑ The time interval between stunning and sticking is too long and the animal starts to regain consciousness

For electrical stunning methods to be effective it is important that:

- ❑ Stunning equipment is working properly, i.e. it must be regularly checked and maintained.
- ❑ Sufficient current is applied for sufficient time to stun the animal.
- ❑ Stunning equipment is positioned correctly on the animal's head / head and back.

Similarly it is possible for animals stunned with a captive bolt to regain consciousness if they are not stunned effectively. This can occur if the captive bolt pistol is incorrectly positioned when fired on the animal's head. With captive bolt stunning it is essential that the pistol is correctly positioned, the correct charge cartridge is used to fire the captive bolt, and the pistol is regularly checked and maintained.

WHAT CAN BE DONE TO IMPROVE THE WAY IN WHICH ANIMALS ARE SLAUGHTERED?

The RSPCA proposes that:

- ❑ Every abattoir must appoint a specially trained Animal Welfare Officer to oversee the welfare of all animals at the slaughterhouse
- ❑ All slaughtermen must be supervised and effectively trained and competent to ensure they are aware of the importance of animals handling and welfare, trained how to stun and stick animals properly, and recognise the signs that an animal has been properly stunned
- ❑ Where captive bolt stunning is used, slaughtermen must make sure that the pistol is positioned accurately on the animal's head and that sufficient charge and calibre bolt is used to ensure an effective stun
- ❑ Where electrical stunning is used methods should be employed, wherever possible, to stun and kill the animal at the same time, minimum stunning currents appropriate to each species must be introduced by law, automatic recording is introduced to monitor the level of current used and the duration of the stunning
- ❑ DEFRA guidelines are implemented immediately to prevent further welfare problems.

WHAT CAN I DO TO HELP?

If you share the RSPCA's concerns, write concisely in your own words to your MP, and:

The Rt Hon Hilary Benn MP
Secretary of State for Environment, Food & Rural Affairs
Dept of Environment, Food & Rural Affairs
Nobel House
17 Smith Square
LONDON SW1A 2HH

Express your concerns about the slaughter of food animals and tell them that you support the RSPCA's proposals.

RSPCA information sheets on '*Religious Slaughter*' and '*The Slaughter of Poultry*' are available from the Farm Animals Department and can be downloaded from the RSPCA Farm Animals Department website at: www.rspca.org.uk/farmanimals



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