

CHAPTER 8

HANDLING AND TRANSPORT

8.1 The handling and transport of poultry was also a major area of concern during the inquiry. The Code of Practice for the Road Transport of Livestock recognises the importance of proper handling of poultry and emphasises the responsibilities of the owners and the drivers involved in the transportation process.¹ The Committee believes it is important to encourage the efficient and considerate treatment of fowls so that any stress or injury associated with handling and transport is minimised.

8.2 The Code of Practice lays down special guidelines for the transport of poultry. These guidelines provide that:

- the design, construction and state of repair of any crate or container used to carry birds should allow them to be put in, conveyed and taken out without injury;
- containers should be ventilated and deep enough (about 25 cm) to allow all birds space to stand, move and seek comfort, but prevent bruising during transport;
- covers should be used to protect birds in crates from wind and rain and from excessively hot or cold conditions; and
- birds should not be held in crates or containers for longer than 24 hours unless they are provided with food and water.²

8.3 More than four million spent hens are transported and slaughtered each year in New South Wales alone. These birds are sometimes transported over distances of 800 kilometres or more.³

Handling Procedures

8.4 Started pullets and spent hens (those that have finished their period of lay in the egg industry) are removed manually from their cages, placed in crates and transported to the egg farms or processing plants. While it is in the interest of producers and processors to carry out this operation quickly and with care in order to minimise mortality and/or carcass damage, the AVA, Dr Murphy, a poultry researcher, and others noted that transport problems still occur from time to time, particularly between farm and processing plant. These problems include rough handling when catching and unloading birds, poor maintenance or stacking, overcrowding, delays during transport and unloading, exposure to excessive heat or cold, loading and unloading birds too hastily and the problem of birds escaping.⁴ The AVA also noted that because of their low market value, spent hens are at the greatest risk of poor handling during transport.⁵

8.5 Catching itself, the placing into crates and transportation is a stressful experience for poultry. Because of this the catching and transport needs to be carried out with full consideration of the birds' welfare. Statistics show that about one per cent of birds die before reaching the slaughter house and, on average, four per cent of carcasses are bruised or have other injuries.⁶ The NSW Department of Agriculture and Fisheries argued that the management practices required to limit stress and carcass damage are well understood and catching crews are generally instructed and supervised to ensure that these practices are followed, although the Committee believes there is nevertheless a need for improvement.⁷

8.6 Dr Murphy, in evidence to the Committee, noted that from her experience of the industry there was a need for gentler handling on some occasions.⁸ The Committee also received evidence that those people involved in the transport of poultry need to be made more aware of the welfare requirements of the animals in their care and, in particular, that they have a sufficient

understanding of their responsibilities under the relevant codes of practice. The RSPCA proposed that a licensing system be introduced for those involved in the transportation of animals commercially and that the equipment used in the transport of animals also be licensed.⁹

Transport of Spent Hens and Pullets

8.7 Other contributors to the inquiry noted the excessively long distances involved in the transport of spent hens and pullets. Mr Poole, of NSW Department of Agriculture and Fisheries, told the Committee of the situation in New South Wales where the processing plant capacity for spent hens has been significantly reduced. This necessitates spent hens having to be transported long distances from farms in New South Wales to Queensland. Mr Poole told the Committee of an instance where a truckload of spent hens en route to Toowoomba broke down at night and the hens were left on the truck. He noted:

The code of practice stipulates that they should not be transported without food or water for any time longer than, say, 24 hours. After that truck was broken down for somewhere around 24 hours they were then transported to Toowoomba. ... By the time those birds were finished being processed it might have been another eight hours. So it is possible that those birds were without food or water for in excess of 40 hours, which I do not believe to be acceptable.¹⁰

8.8 Mr Poole also recounted another incident involving the transport of spent hens to Queensland. In that incident the vehicle was stopped en route and it was found that some ten per cent of the birds were dead due to overloading of the truck and the transport of the birds in the heat of the day. Mr Poole noted that the mortality rate would have been substantially higher by the time the birds reached their destination and were processed in Toowoomba.¹¹ The Committee believes that effective transport back-up needs to be available to cope with these situations.

8.9 Mr Macindoe of NSW Department of Agriculture and Fisheries told the Committee that the Department was concerned 'to the point where we should and do normally speak to the operator concerned', due to instances of breaches of the Code of Practice in the area of transport, although he added that most were isolated cases often with 'extenuating circumstances'.¹²

8.10 The Committee was particularly concerned with the problems associated with the transportation of spent hens. The Committee notes that this problem is further accentuated because of their low market value. The Committee was also told that spent hens are more likely to suffer fractures during handling and transportation because of the brittleness of their bones.¹³

8.11 Another area of concern was the conditions under which pullets are transported. Mr Poole told the Committee that:

It is known that pullets can travel across a State from another State, say from Victoria to Queensland, to satisfy a market. Once they are crated, it is near impossible to provide those birds with water; so again those birds, I suggest, would be without water during that period of transport.¹⁴

8.12 Mr Poole further noted that the problem was mainly with the smaller pullet suppliers. He remarked:

There are several independent pullet growers-suppliers in the State [NSW] and I have been informed verbally by those operators that it sometimes takes them well in excess of 24 hours, and maybe up to 40 hours, to get to the areas that they need to in order to drop off their small quantities of birds along the way.¹⁵

Mr Poole also argued that especially in hot weather and where sufficient water was not provided situations such as these constituted cruelty to the birds transported in this manner.¹⁶

8.13 The Committee believes that instances such as these provide a clear case where the welfare of the birds are being seriously compromised. Contraventions of the Code of Practice are also involved in these cases where birds are being transported for periods in excess of 24 hours without being provided with food and water.

Conclusion

8.14 The Committee, on the basis of its own observations and the evidence presented to it, was concerned about the conditions under which some spent hens and pullets are transported.

8.15 The Committee's main areas of concern have been the insufficient care taken during the handling and transportation process and the often excessive distances involved in the transport of poultry. The Committee believes that in many cases the reasons for these deficiencies lay with the handlers and transport operators. The Committee therefore recommends that the information contained in the Codes of Practice for road transport of livestock be more widely disseminated by Government extension services, poultry companies, transport operators and the veterinary profession.

8.16 The Committee was also concerned that the conditions under which poultry are sometimes transported involved breaches of the Code of Practice. The Committee believes that sufficient resources should be provided to ensure that the provisions of the Code are enforced and recommends that additional manpower resources be provided to each State and Territory Department of Agriculture to ensure compliance with the provisions of the Codes of Practice for road transport of livestock.

ENDNOTES

1. Australian Bureau of Animal Health, Sub-Committee on Animal Welfare, Model Code of Practice for the Welfare of Animals: No. 3 - Road Transport of Livestock, Canberra, 1983.
2. *ibid.*, p. 18.
3. Evidence, NSW Department of Agriculture and Fisheries, p. S8185.
4. Evidence, Australian Veterinary Association, p. S8779; Dr L. Murphy, p. 9550.
5. Evidence, Australian Veterinary Association, p. S8779.
6. Evidence, NSW Department of Agriculture and Fisheries, p. S8185.
7. Evidence, NSW Department of Agriculture and Fisheries, p. S8185.
8. Evidence, Dr L. Murphy, p. 9550.
9. Evidence, Dr Wirth, RSPCA Australia, p. 9607.
10. Evidence, Mr Poole, NSW Department of Agriculture and Fisheries, p. 8769.
11. Letter to the Committee from Mr G. Poole, NSW Department of Agriculture and Fisheries, dated 31 October 1990.
12. Evidence, Mr Macindoe, NSW Department of Agriculture and Fisheries, p. 8771.

13. Evidence, Mr Bell, Australian Veterinary Association,
p. 9363.
14. Evidence, Mr G. Poole, NSW Department of Agriculture and
Fisheries, p. 8769.
15. *ibid.*, p. 8770.
16. *ibid.*, p. 8771.