

Animal welfare charity The Humane League challenges Defra with judicial review over the breeding of fast growing chickens



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Animal welfare charity The Humane League's judicial review over the breeding of fast growing chickens, dubbed 'FrankenChickens' because of their disproportionate large bodies and physical deformities caused by their accelerated weight gain, has been given a date for the hearing.

The Humane League filed for a judicial review in August 2021, challenging Defra's failure to prevent the breeding of fast growing broiler chicken for human consumption. The 2007's Welfare and Farmed Animals Regulations states that "Animals may only be kept for farming

that are harmful to their health.

In 2021 **1.12 billion broiler chickens were slaughtered in the UK** alone. 89% of these are fast growing chickens, according to *Poultry World*.

"Under Paragraph 29 of Schedule 1 to the Welfare of Farmed Animals Regulations 2007 animals may only be kept for farming purposes if it can reasonably be expected, on the basis of their genotype or phenotype, that they can be kept without any detrimental effect on their health or welfare," says The Humane League's solicitor Edie Bowles who specialises in animal protection law. *"There is clear science that shows that such detriment exists when keeping fast growing chickens bred for meat. Fast growing chickens are those that are bred to reach slaughter weight in around 35 days. The Department of Food Environment and Rural Affairs is allowing this to continue."*

Fast growing broiler chickens have been selectively bred to be as profitable as possible. These breeds of chicken grow much faster than other types, and reach a slaughter weight of 2.5 kg at just around 35 days, compared to 63 in the 60s. Their breast muscles and flesh grow so fast that their bodies can't keep up with the weight, causing lameness and other leg conditions, burns, diseases and lethargy.

A 2021 study conducted by Mary Baxter, Research Fellow, IGFS – School of Biological Sciences, Queens University Belfast, Anne Richmond, Head of Research and Development at Moy Park, Ursula Lavery, Head of Quality & Technical, Moy Park and Professor Niamh O'Connell, School of Biological Sciences, Queens University Belfast and published on **Plos One**, titled '*A comparison of fast growing broiler chickens with a slower-growing breed type reared on Higher Welfare commercial farms*', which compared fast growing chicken breed Ross 308 with slower growing Hubbard Redbro broilers, concluded that: "We found that slower growing Hubbard Redbro broilers demonstrated a number of better health and welfare outcomes when compared to conventional Ross 308 broilers under commercial conditions. Although there were only minor differences noted in their general behaviour, better leg health and feathering was observed among the slower growing flocks. Redbro broilers also appeared to be more physically able to make use of the perches available, move into cleared areas of the house to play, and react to approaching observers. Redbro broilers were cleared an average of 5.5 days later than the fast growing breed at a lighter weight, but they appeared to be healthier throughout the cycle. Lower levels of mortality, fewer culls and a lower number of carcass downgrades were recorded among Redbro flocks."

"A chicken's quality of life is drastically reduced by being a fast-growing breed.", says Amro Hussain, Public Affairs Lead for The Humane League UK. *"Their bodies grow so rapidly that protein is replaced by streaks of fat in their breast muscles, causing white striping disease. Whereas ordinarily chickens are lively and inquisitive, fast-growing breeds are more likely to be lame or immobile – this often leaves them lying in their own ammonia-rich waste, which burns them. The strain of their bodies expanding at such a rate also makes them more prone to heart-attacks. This list is not comprehensive – these animals are burdened by their enormous weight and a host of diseases – their short lives are defined by suffering."*

Fast growing breeds suffer from muscular myopathies which cause woody breast, resulting in tough meat, and white striping defect, a striation of congealed fat and collagen visible on the

characterised by a green colour, which is visible when the fillet is raw and when it's cooked.

Poor welfare standards don't just cause great pain to animals, they are also a health risk for humans. The Humane League states that improving the welfare environment for chickens will result in better meat for the public and more profits for farmers.

*"Fast-growing chickens tend to suffer from white-stripping disease, which shows itself as white streaks on breast meat.", says Amro Hussain. "This meat has lower protein levels, less flavour and a slippery texture. The fact that these fast-growing chickens are more prone to disease leads to **higher antibiotic use** – putting humans at risk of antibiotic resistant bacteria, and even future pandemics."*

In 2018 a group of leading animal welfare organisations, including **The Humane League**, developed **The Better Chicken Commitment**, a set of criteria which aims to improve the lives of chickens reared for meat by eliminating some of the very worst problems inherent in the factory farming of chickens. Over 140 companies have signed up, including Nestlé, **Burger King**, Subway, **Unilever**, KraftHeinz, KFC, Waitrose and M&S.

"If fast-growing breeds of chicken are banned, and higher welfare alternatives like the slow-growing breeds of the Better Chicken Commitment (BCC) are adopted, it would mean that all consumers would be guaranteed a higher quality of welfare for the animals they eat," says Hussain. "Support for good animal welfare is high, and consistent across income levels. If there are price increases those institutions like supermarkets, which have profited from selling cruelty and whose profit-margins are ever-widening, should help consumers access these better products. No family should be forced to purchase cruelty because they're on a low income."

"As for producers, the law means they never should have been raising these chickens in the first place. Defra has already announced it will make funding available to farmers adopting the BCC – such subsidies should help. However, reports from the Netherlands suggest that farmers themselves prefer raising slower growing birds – they are less sick, more space means they are easier to manage, and altogether farmer satisfaction is improved."

The Humane League's judicial review will have its initial hearing on 22 March.

"This is a permission hearing meaning if we are successful we will be granted permission to a full hearing in the High Court." explains Edie Bowles.

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