

Voluntary regulations on poultry welfare; Are they truly voluntary?

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May be you have seen it on TV, heard it on the radio or perhaps you read it in the newspaper; McDonald's now demands that all suppliers adhere to poultry welfare guidelines in order to continue to be their customer. Furthermore, rather than vague welfare guidelines they demand clear minimum requirements that every supplier must meet without delay in the next few months. McDonald's will check that the requirements are met by conducting un-announced audits by their own personnel. Guided by McDonald's all the other restaurant franchises followed; Burger King, Wendys, KFC, Applebees, Outbackand the list continues to grow! In fact it is currently becoming difficult to find one restaurant that does not have demands on welfare issues. This trend is also being followed by supermarket chains such as Safeway and Wal-Mart.

Some poultry companies began doing their homework as soon as they realized the situation and started developing their own welfare guidelines. Others, however, have made no attempts to take any action regarding this issue, as they consider it to be opening a can of worms. Neither do they plan to take any action in the near future. The regulations are voluntary and no animal industry, either poultry or others are forced to participate, so it is really up to each company to decide what to do regarding the issue. However, I do believe that the companies that decide not to comply with the guidelines may face a great challenge in the near future.

My concern is not about whether or not the companies are implementing welfare guidelines. My real concern is this; Will the future and sustainability of the companies that have not, and plan not to have welfare standards be compromised? With more and more potential customers joining the welfare "effort", what will be the market for standard chickens? Where are they going to sell them? The rules of the game are

changing and factors such as production cost, even quality may not be as critical as they used to be unless the birds are raised under certain welfare standards, as there will likely be less demand for them. Furthermore, in the near future if there is any market left for no-welfare chickens the premiums may be low as they may be considered “second class” chickens. Am I wrong? Perhaps, but I think the Delmarva poultry industry needs to at least consider very carefully the options left to insure that they will be able to survive, and survive successfully, to this new challenge.

Although some welfare standards for broilers are a little more difficult to achieve, particularly regarding the control of ammonia levels, for the most part they can be considered common sense and good management practices that promote bird performance and are relatively easy to comply with. The main concerns about developing welfare guidelines are, however, the cost of the implementation, the hassle of having to deal with more paperwork, and, not to mention the sensation that they lost the battle against the animal activists that were ultimately responsible for the change. It is understandable. However, while we tend to think about the negative sides of the welfare guidelines there are also positive aspects of the implementation that could in fact be advantageous for the poultry companies and the contract growers. These positive aspects need to be considered as well. For example, the training of the personnel on certain management issues that up until now have not been considered will help to boost bird performance and reduce condemnations. Insuring environmental quality will help to maintain a better environment for the birds, and for the farmers themselves, reducing the need for veterinary treatment of the flocks with the consequent savings for the farmers. Most welfare guidelines include strict biosecurity protocols, therefore reducing the chances of infectious disease outbreaks and would be effective in containing any potential outbreaks in the event that it would happen. And last but not least, application of welfare standards may substantially improve the image of the poultry industry in the consumers’ eyes, which ultimately will decide what to buy and where to eat....