

Briefing for the Public Petitions Committee

Petition Number: [PE1797](#)

Main Petitioner: Kirsten MacQuarrie

Subject: End live chick culling

Calls on the Parliament to urge the Scottish Government to ban the maceration of newborn male chicks and set a deadline to end all live chick culling in the egg industry.

Background

The petition calls on the Scottish Parliament to urge the Scottish Government to ban the maceration of newborn male chicks and set a deadline to end all live chick culling in the egg industry.

The [background information](#) to the petition states that

“Male chicks in the UK egg industry are currently killed using gas or maceration: while gas is the more common method, maceration (mechanical destruction) remains legal. I understand all plants in the UK have at least one macerator. This killing typically takes place on the first and only day of life for male chicks, occurring at an immense scale – the charity Animal Aid estimates that 30 million chicks are killed in the UK every year - and it is the case for all newborn male birds, whether they are hatched on free-range facilities or not.

“In January 2020, France announced that it would be outlawing the practice of culling the egg industry’s day-old male chicks by 2021. Last year, the German Federal Administrative Court also ruled that this practice could continue only on a temporary basis, and in Switzerland the act of macerating male chicks has been banned since the beginning of 2020. In the US, the trade group United Egg Producers has also committed to 2020 being the final year of live chick culling, as the technology available to the egg industry advances beyond the need for this practice.”

Hatching for egg production in Scotland

The question of culling day-old chicks relates to hatcheries for laying hens (i.e. for hatching day-old chicks, that will become hens to lay table eggs once mature)¹, rather than egg producing farms.

There are no hatcheries located in Scotland producing laying hens for egg production. There are a small number of hatcheries in England.

There are egg producers in Scotland who will obtain their laying hens from a hatchery.

Why are chicks culled?

Traditionally, female chicks were used for egg production, and male chicks were raised for meat. However, selective breeding throughout the 20th century gave rise to specific poultry breeds for meat and eggs, resulting in male chicks born into egg production no longer being considered optimal for meat.

In most situations, there is therefore no use for male chicks within egg production, and consequently, these chicks are most often killed shortly after hatching.² The culled male chicks are used to feed other species such as birds of prey and reptiles, kept both privately and in zoos.

How are chicks culled?

Shortly after hatching, the sex of the chick is determined, and male chicks are diverted for culling.

The law on these practices in Scotland is regulated by Schedule 11 of [The Welfare of Animals \(Slaughter or Killing\) Regulations 1995](#) ("the 1995 Regulations"). Under the 1995 Regulations chicks must be under 72 hours old, and any mechanical apparatus used must be used by a skilled operator and be designed so as to produce immediate death without any unnecessary suffering caused to the chicks.

A "mechanical apparatus producing immediate death" (e.g. a macerator), a gas mixture consisting of a high concentration of argon gas or carbon dioxide, or dislocating the neck are the only permitted practices in Scotland.

The Humane Slaughter Association (HSA) is a charity "promoting the humane treatment of all food animals worldwide" and produces practical guidelines for the food industry, including the British Egg Industry Council. The HSA only recommends dislocation of the neck in an emergency but state that both maceration and gas are humane.

¹ British Egg Industry Council, pers. comm. 10 March 2020.

² <https://www.hsa.org.uk/downloads/technical-notes/TN14-gas-killing-of-chicks-in-hatcheries.pdf>

In relation to maceration specifically, the HSA state that “Although it is aesthetically unpleasant, IMD [maceration] is an acceptable and humane method of chick disposal providing the equipment has been well maintained and used responsibly.”³ The HSA specifies the conditions and handling methods that are appropriate to ensure humane slaughter, and stresses that it is important that they are carried out appropriately by trained staff.

Permitted gas mixtures by law include 100% carbon dioxide, or a mixture with high concentrations of argon gas. The HSA does not consider using 100% carbon dioxide acceptable for chicks as CO₂ is “thought to be highly aversive to birds at concentrations above 25%”⁴.

The British Egg Industry Council confirm that all culling at commercial hatcheries in the UK is done using 100% argon gas, and that carbon dioxide is not used on welfare grounds.⁵

The British Egg Industry Council state that:

“Currently in the UK, disposal of male chicks is carried out quickly, painlessly and humanely. This is by controlled exposure to argon, which is quick and painless, following a Code of Practice approved by the Humane Slaughter Association and monitored by the Government's Animal and Plant Health Agency. UK pullet hatcheries (hatching chicks for future egg production) are members of the RSPCA Assured Scheme and are monitored independently by the RSPCA, as well as by DEFRA/APHA.

“Maceration is not used by pullet hatcheries in the UK for disposal of live male chicks, although it is a legally approved method of disposal of chicks and is widely used in other countries. Macerators are however used in the UK for the disposal of unhatched eggs - indeed it is a legal requirement for hatcheries to have a macerator for this purpose.”⁶

Certification schemes: Rules for chick culling

The [Royal Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals \(RSPCA\)](#) run the RSPCA Assured certification scheme. While the RSPCA recognises such practices can be distressing, and welcomes research into alternatives, the RSPCA Assured standards do permit maceration and gassing of chicks under strict conditions.⁷ The organisation states, similar to the Humane Slaughter Association, that “both maceration, which kills chicks instantaneously – and the use of inert gases (such as argon or nitrogen) as well as inert gas

³ <https://www.hsa.org.uk/downloads/technical-notes/TN9-mechanical-destruction.pdf>

⁴ <https://www.hsa.org.uk/downloads/technical-notes/TN14-gas-killing-of-chicks-in-hatcheries.pdf>

⁵ British Egg Industry Council, pers. comm. 10 March 2020.

⁶ British Egg Industry Council press statement, sent in pers. comm. 10 March 2020

⁷ <https://science.rspca.org.uk/documents/1494935/9042554/RSPCA+welfare+standards+for+hatcheries+%28PDF+2.45MB%29.pdf/07353d8b-3466-a052-dcfd-33365b3f2476?t=1557668425642>

mixtures can offer humane methods of euthanasia, as long as they are carried out correctly by trained competent staff⁸.

90% of British eggs also carry the British Lion certification⁹, run by the British Egg Industry Council. All of the UK commercial pullet hatcheries also have British Lion certification.¹⁰ According to the British Lion code of practice, male or cull chicks within egg production carrying this certification must be gassed, not macerated, and the code of practice specifies that an argon gas mixture should be used.¹¹

What happens after the chicks are culled?

After culling by either method, male chicks tend to be used for food for other species, such as reptiles and birds of prey.¹² The British Egg Industry Council state that “the demand from both zoos and private owners is such that approximately 30% of the chicks required are imported from other countries”.¹³

Perceptions of chick culling

The practice of killing male chicks is often emotive. A German study carried out a survey which found that 80% of respondents found the issue “very problematic”¹⁴.

A number of UK animal welfare and animal rights charities find the practice problematic;¹⁵¹⁶¹⁷ some support ending egg consumption as a result of practices within the egg industry, such as chick culling.¹⁸

What are the alternatives?

A number of people would prefer to see alternatives developed, both within the poultry industry and among concerned members of the public.

- **In-ovo sexing:** In-ovo sexing allows the sex of the chick to be determined in the egg, allowing only the female eggs to be incubated fully. There are a number of different technologies currently being developed.¹⁹

⁸ <https://www.rspcaassured.org.uk/maceration-of-male-chicks/>

⁹ British Egg Industry Council, pers. Comm. 10 March 2020.

¹⁰ British Egg Industry Council, pers. Comm. 10 March 2020.

¹¹ <http://www.britisheggindustryCouncil.com/download/LCoPV7.pdf>

¹² <http://www.poultrynews.co.uk/production/hatching/analysis-hatching-a-new-approach.html>

¹³ <https://www.fwi.co.uk/livestock/poultry/layers/no-alternatives-to-culling-day-old-male-chicks-yet>

¹⁴ <https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s10806-019-09806-y>

¹⁵ <https://www.viva.org.uk/resources/video-library/hatchery-investigation>;

¹⁶ <https://www.compassioninfoodbusiness.com/our-news/2015/11/eliminating-male-chick-culling-in-the-egg-industry>

¹⁷ <https://www.peta.org.uk/blog/the-uk-egg-industry-is-lying-to-you/>

¹⁸ <https://www.viva.org.uk/resources/video-library/hatchery-investigation>

¹⁹ <https://www.sciencemag.org/news/2019/08/ethical-eggs-could-save-male-chicks-mass-slaughter>

the state of North-Rhine Westphalia issued a ban in 2013. However, the high court in Leipzig ruled in June 2019 that the practice would be permitted until alternatives were available.²⁶

At the end of January 2020, France announced that culling male chicks would be banned from the end of 2021²⁷. A Franco-German partnership was announced at the same time, where the two countries will accelerate and share scientific expertise on alternatives and technological advancements to replace the practice.²⁸

In Switzerland, culling chicks by maceration has been banned from the beginning of 2020, though the use of gas is allowed.²⁹

Egg industry bodies around the world are also committing to phasing out male chick culling in favour of finding other alternatives. United Egg Producers, who represent about 90% of egg production in the United States have *“embraced our drive toward the goal of eliminating this practice as soon as it is commercially viable and economically feasible”*.³⁰

The Zentralverbandes der Deutschen Geflügelwirtschaft (ZDG), a representative body for the German poultry industry, have stated that they want to stop chick culling as quickly as possible, and their aim is to halve the number of chicks killed by 2022, but warn that banning chick culling would result in importation of laying hens from elsewhere, where this practice is not regulated.³¹

The UK industry have not committed to phasing out chick culling with concerns that in-ovo technology is not yet fully developed, but the British Egg Industry Council stated on 30 January 2020 in response to France’s announced steps to a ban that they are “excited” by the developments in technology.³²

Scottish Government Action

The Scottish Government have not committed to taking any action. The response from the Cabinet Secretary for Environment, Climate Change and Land Reform in response to the petitioner stated that

“the killing of surplus chicks which are less than 72 hours old and embryos in hatchery waste is regulated by Schedule 11 of The Welfare of Animals (Slaughter or Killing) Regulations 1995 (“the 1995 Regulations”). Under these

²⁶ <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-europe-48620884>

²⁷ <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-europe-51301915>

²⁸ <https://agriculture.gouv.fr/fin-du-broyage-des-poussins-males-julia-klockner-et-didier-guillaume-mobilisent-les-acteurs-des>

²⁹ https://www.swissinfo.ch/eng/animal-protection_-switzerland-bans-shredding-of-male-chicks-/45240798

³⁰ <https://unitedegg.com/united-egg-producers-updated-statement-on-male-chick-culling/>

³¹ <https://www.poultryworld.net/Health/Articles/2019/11/Germans-plea-for-sense-in-matter-of-killing-day-old-chicks-504254E/>

³² <https://www.fwi.co.uk/livestock/poultry/layers/no-alternatives-to-culling-day-old-male-chicks-yet>

regulations mechanical apparatus must be used by a skilled operator and be designed so as to produce immediate death without any unnecessary suffering caused to the chicks. The Scottish Government noted it is aware of ongoing research into methods of determining the sex of a chick prior to hatching, however the methods currently available are not viable on an industrial scale.”

Scottish Parliament Action

The Scottish Parliament has not taken any relevant action.

SPICe Research

10/03/2020

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