



United Poultry Concerns

Promoting the Compassionate and
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Privatization of Poultry Slaughter Inspection and Animal Advocacy

*Reflections on the Government's Proposal to Privatize Poultry Slaughter
Inspection and Whether Animal Advocates Should Support Efforts to
Make Poultry Products Safer for Human Consumption*

By **Karen Davis, PhD, President of United Poultry Concerns**

On March 7, 2012, Food & Water Watch posted an announcement that “privatized meat inspection experiment jeopardizes food safety.” Food & Water Watch explains in a new report that in the interest of budget-cutting, “more defective and unsanitary poultry contaminated with feathers, bile and feces could make its way to consumers if the USDA’s controversial pilot project for privatized inspection in poultry slaughter plants is expanded” from two dozen slaughter facilities since 1998 to all poultry slaughter facilities, as proposed by Agriculture Secretary Tom Vilsack under the Obama Administration.

The proposed Hazard Analysis Critical Control Points (HACCP)-based Inspection Models Project (HIMP), in addition to removing USDA inspectors from assembly lines and putting “inspection” in the hands of slaughter plant employees, could involve increasing assembly line speeds from around 91 birds a minute to 175 or even 200 birds a minute. Inspectors responsible for inspecting 35 birds per minute for bruises, sores, abscesses, feathers, and fecal contamination would have even less time for the job, down to couple of seconds per bird under the proposal.



Photo by Carol McCormick

Back when I started United Poultry Concerns, in 1990, the first letter-to-the editor I published in my fledgling capacity as president of UPC appeared in *The Atlantic* in February 1991. I wrote it in response to the magazine’s November 1990 report called “Dirty Chicken,” which began: “If consumers knew of the filth in many poultry-processing plants and the likelihood that the chicken they buy is contaminated or diseased, many USDA inspectors say, they would think twice before buying it. Has a move toward industry self-inspection meant that a USDA stamp of approval is no longer reassuring?”

This 1990 “Dirty Chicken” report is as relevant today as it was 22 years ago. For example, we learn that:

After the Reagan Administration took office, in 1980, the speed at which poultry moved down the assembly line was allowed to more than double. In the 1970s, inspectors say, the line speed was about thirty-five birds a minute. If something caught an inspector’s eye, he could stop the line to take a closer look at a potentially diseased or contaminated bird. The maximum rate allowed is ninety-one birds a minute, and now many inspectors say that they can’t see much of anything. Even if an inspector is able to find a defect on a bird, the new “streamlined inspection system” (SIS), implemented in 1986, may not allow him to do much about it. If the violation involves what under SIS is considered an aesthetic rather than a public-health problem, the inspector must wait for plant employees to clean up the problem. Some inspectors say that many of the violations said to be aesthetic – such as oil, rust, feathers, and lesions on skin – are in fact dangerous (p. 42).

Back then, inspectors said that under the “streamlined inspection system (SIS) implemented in 1986, they easily passed birds through inspection that were “full of feathers, fecal contamination, blood clots, skin blisters, and abscesses.” Air sacculitis, a respiratory infection that produces pus around the lungs of virtually every bird people eat, was allowed to pass inspection, and blisters, abscesses and cancerous tumors were simply trimmed off birds sold for human consumption – just as they are now, in 2012.

A 1992 article in the *Journal of Applied Poultry Research* discusses aspects of what was then called NELS, or New Efficient Line Speed, which allowed poultry slaughter plants to speed up lines to 180-182 birds per minute in a “modified honor system for self-inspection” under USDA’s Food Safety and Inspection Service, or FSIS.

In 1996, President Bill Clinton ordered what *The Washington Post* on July 7 that year called an Overhaul of Meat Safety Inspections. He legalized the “FSIS Pathogen Reduction/HACCP Proposal.” Designed to promote strategies to “reduce foodborne pathogens on fresh meat and poultry during slaughter,” according to *Broiler Industry* in February 1996, the new inspection system was prompted by the E. coli outbreak which killed four people and sickened hundreds more as a result of eating contaminated ground beef at Jack in the Box restaurants in Seattle, Washington in 1993. The HACCP Proposal sought to update the Meat Inspection Law of 1906, which focused on identifying visible defects and diseases in animals in slaughter plants, to include identification and control of invisible contamination by disease organisms such as E. coli, Salmonella, and Campylobacter bacteria, which, as *World Poultry* observed in 2007, “are ubiquitous in poultry-producing facilities all around the world.”



Photo: OK Industries
The new system of decompressing poultry to death.

In January 2011, President Barack Obama signed into law the Food Safety Modernization Act. Hailed in The White House Blog as setting in motion “sweeping improvements” by the Food and Drug Administration “in the security and safety of our nation’s food supply” of fruits, vegetables and eggs, the Act does not cover meat and poultry inspection, which is under the U.S. Department of Agriculture.

Meanwhile, amid presidential signatures and “sweeping improvements,” a report by *The Atlanta Journal-Constitution* in Georgia on May 26, 1991 applies in 2012:

Every week throughout the South, millions of chickens leaking yellow pus, stained by green feces, contaminated by harmful bacteria, or marred by lung and heart infections, cancerous tumors, or skin conditions are shipped for sale to consumers, instead of being condemned and destroyed. [One inspector said:] “I’ve had bad air sac birds that had yellow pus visibly coming out of their insides, and I was told to save the breast meat off them and even save the second joint of the wing. You might get those breasts today at a store in a package of breast fillets. And you might get the other part in a pack of buffalo wings.”

So a question is, what difference does it make, from the standpoint of food safety, whether poultry inspection is conducted by USDA inspectors or by privatized poultry slaughter workers? Faced with so many contaminated, diseased and injured birds whizzing by on the conveyer belts, it may be difficult even for experts to determine which ones to pass inspection following “aesthetic” surgery and chlorine treatment, and which ones to consign to the pet food, poultry & livestock feed piles. And then there is the category of the putrid flesh that is set aside for further processing into chicken and turkey sausages and patties.



Photo by Carol McCormick

USDA inspection of chicken and turkey carcasses has always been iffy, often a matter of public reassurances more than of actual diligence. It isn't always the inspectors' fault either. As inspectors told Gene Bruce when she was researching her “Dirty Chicken” report, they are often “reprimanded by USDA higher-ups when they flunk too many birds or stop the line to inspect more closely.” They may be hounded and transferred for trying to do their job. (Of course Lester Crawford, head of Food Safety and Inspection Service at the time, rejected these charges, claiming: “That would be a felony, and we would not tolerate that.”)

Another question is whether animal advocates should support efforts to make the products of animal suffering and abuse safer for human consumption. This question is both ethical and practical. Birds are excluded from the 1958 Humane Methods of Slaughter Act, which does not even protect the animals it is mandated to protect. Billions of chickens and turkeys as well as millions of pigeons, pheasants, quails, ostriches, emus and other “miscellaneous” avian species have no federal protection in U.S. slaughter plants. How, if at all, does USDA carcass inspection affect the treatment of these birds while they are still alive and conscious during the handling and slaughter process? How might their treatment be even crueler under privatized inspection?

It is hard to imagine how these birds could be treated worse than they already are, as revealed by undercover investigations, documented in my book *Prisoned Chickens, Poisoned Eggs: An Inside Look at the Modern Poultry Industry*, and posted on UPC's Website at www.upc-online.org/slaughter. Ethically, each of us must decide as animal advocates whether we want to help make the products of animal suffering and abuse safer and more comfortable for meateaters – especially if there is no evidence that better carcass inspection results in less cruel treatment of the birds while they are living.

For the Food & Water Watch analysis of Secretary of Agriculture Tom Vilsack's proposal to privatize poultry inspection, go to <http://www.foodandwaterwatch.org/food/foodsafety/privatized-poultry-inspection-usdas-pilot-project-results/>.



Photo by Linda Howard

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