

THE TRUTH ABOUT MCDONALD'S & ANIMAL WELFARE

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THE TRUTH ABOUT MCDONALD'S & ANIMAL WELFARE

In 2017, McDonald's issued a public relations statement outlining an eight-point plan for its chicken supply. Unfortunately, the statement lacks the meaningful reforms needed to address the most pressing animal cruelty problems--reforms which dozens of other major chains have adopted. We, the above animal protection charities—representing tens of millions of people—are deeply concerned about this and, in light of McDonald's PR statements, feel obliged to clarify what the company is and is not doing.

FIRST, THE BAD NEWS:

Chickens raised for McDonald's are bred to grow unnaturally large, incredibly fast. According to University of Arkansas researchers, if humans grew at a rate similar to that of commercially bred chickens in the poultry industry, a six-pound newborn would weigh 660 pounds after just two months. Because these genetically manipulated Frankenbirds are killed at only about 6 weeks old, they are still developing—and their bodies can't take the strain: many suffer heart attacks; many endure crippling deformities; and many suffer broken legs, which buckle under the enormous weight of their own bodies. To make matters worse, they're confined in cramped, barren warehouses that are kept dark, often with no natural light. There are no forms of "environmental enrichment" (stimuli to keep birds interested and engaged with their surroundings and to promote activity). The litter (the shavings on which the birds live) quality is poor, and they're confined in such density, with tens of thousands of other birds, that they're prevented from moving freely.

NOW, THE GOOD NEWS:

Improvements are available and are being implemented by nearly 100 major food companies, including McDonald's competitors. These improvements include both input-based measures (what chickens need for better welfare) and welfare outcome assessments (what we measure in order to know that chickens have better welfare). Adequate provision of both inputs and outcomes is essential in order to achieve better welfare.

Credible third-party animal standard organizations Global Animal Partnership (GAP) and the Royal Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (RSPCA) are researching and approving broiler breeds based on animal welfare outcomes using commonly-used and transparent scientific methods and protocols. The goal is to avoid problems chickens suffer today from the rapid growth the industry forces them to endure. For example, the input requirements for stocking density (to ensure birds aren't crammed as tightly together) is based on independent scientific research and consensus. GAP also has a set of requirements to meaningfully improve birds' living conditions through the provision of sufficient quality and quantity of litter, lighting and enrichment.

Burger King, Subway, Jack in the Box, Sonic, and dozens of other major food companies have mandated that their chicken suppliers implement these precise reforms by 2024. Even several large poultry producers are listening. Perdue Farms, the country's fourth-largest chicken company, has announced sweeping reforms to begin to account for these demands for healthier chickens raised under better conditions. Similarly, Wayne Farms—another major producer—is also taking steps to meet the demand for birds raised with higher welfare.



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SO WHAT'S THE DEAL WITH MCDONALD'S?

A close read of McDonald's PR statement reveals that it fails to make specific, firm commitments, but rather centers on vague assertions that have little (if anything) to do with the major animal welfare concerns outlined above and lacks the same type of specifics found in Burger King's (and dozens of other companies') broiler welfare policies. For example:

From McDonald's Statement:

"Improved Farm-Level Welfare Outcomes: Source chickens for the McDonald's System that are raised with improved welfare outcomes. We plan to set targets, measure performance and report on key farm-level welfare outcomes across our largest markets."

Our Response:

We certainly favor improved animal welfare outcomes, but this statement is so vague as to be meaningless. Not only does it lack any of the specific goals outlined by Burger King and other companies, but it raises more questions than it answers. What are the outcomes McDonald's will measure? How are those outcomes set? When will McDonald's set targets? How will it measure performance? What are the "key" issues it will cover?

While we acknowledge the importance of improved animal welfare outcomes, we believe that McDonald's is ignoring the already existing scientific research and evidence that tells us what the targets should be for welfare outcomes. The claim that the company is "planning to set targets, measure performance, and report on key farm-level welfare outcomes" implies that it will engage in a long and costly research process, only to find out what has already been clearly established by peer-reviewed science as basic environmental improvements that can have significant effects on the welfare of chickens.

From McDonald's Statement:

“Innovative On-Farm Animal Health and Welfare Monitoring Technologies: Partner with technology companies, producers, and suppliers to develop on-farm monitoring systems to automate the gathering of key animal health and welfare indicators, including behavioral measures. Once established, these technologies will highlight potential areas for improvement in real time and will be among the first of their kind available at a commercial scale.”

Our Response:

Here, again, the statement is too vague to offer a real sense of meaningful progress. What are the indicators that will be gathered? What “behavioral measures” will be monitored? Who will be monitoring them? Moreover, will McDonald's require the “potential” improvements highlighted to be adopted by suppliers?

While we support the use of automated monitoring technologies, without knowing what the targets are for basic improvements in the short term, there is no expectation that the use of these technologies will lead to better welfare. Additionally, regardless of the means used to monitor and track animal welfare, transparency and accountability in communication with the public are the ultimate requirement in tracking progress and building trust. Even the most advanced technologies will be meaningless unless these results can also be verified by third-party auditors, as other companies are doing.



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McDonald's Statement:

“McDonald's Advisory Council for Chicken Sustainability: Establish a global, multi-stakeholder Advisory Council focused on chicken sustainability, with participation from academics and scientists, suppliers and industry experts, animal welfare and environmental advocates to support our continued journey on chicken sustainability, inclusive of health and welfare.”

Our Response:

The way McDonald's words this certainly makes this council sound good, but a close read reveals quite a lot. For example, the council's singular goal is apparently to “support” McDonald's—not to guide or push or help McDonald's progress, but merely to support its program - which is both undefined and short of its peers' efforts. Thus, it appears as if McDonald's—which we already know isn't tackling chicken welfare in a meaningful way—is putting together a council whose sole goal will be to endorse the company's actions.

Further, it's likely the company will stack the deck with those who share its current views, rather than those who'd seek to actually improve conditions for animals. Why do we think that's likely? Because McDonald's has already used this tactic before to delay animal welfare progress.

When McDonald's was facing pressure over using eggs from caged chickens, it helped form the so-called “Coalition for Sustainable Egg Supply (CSES).” This sounds a lot like this “council for chicken sustainability.” The CSES was supposedly created to “study” the pros and cons of cage vs. cage-free housing. And like this council, the CSES included “academics and scientists, suppliers and industry experts.” The thing is, McDonald's chose participants who were on the record as publicly supporting locking hens in cages for their entire lives. Indeed, from the get-go, the CSES seemed to have a foregone conclusion, and was designed quite clearly to favor cage confinement over cage-free conditions. (Read The Humane Society of the United States' response to the CSES [here](#).) Now, facing pressure over its chicken standards, McDonald's seems to be reviving the same delay tactic it's tried before.

McDonald's Statement:

“Natural Behavior: Require chickens to be raised in housing environments that promote natural behaviors such as pecking, perching and dust-bathing. These behaviors are encouraged through enrichments, such as the provision of perches and pecking objects, access to floor litter 100 percent of the time, and providing a minimum of 20 lux light intensity during photoperiods, with a minimum of 6 hours of darkness (4 hours to be continuous) during a 24 hour time period, reflecting scientific evidence from poultry experts.”

Our Response:

This lacks specifics on too many important areas. For example, what type of enrichments will be required, and how many? Would one single perching area in a warehouse with 250,000 birds suffice for McDonald's? It is commonplace that birds already have access to floor litter. Rather, it is the quality and quantity of litter that is of great concern--and these important details are missing, which renders this policy vacant of any positive change. Other companies have specific requirements on these issues, while McDonald's seems to have none. And the specifics the company does offer (on lighting)—merely mirror current laws in the European Union. So on that point, all McDonald's is saying is that its suppliers can't abuse birds in ways that are so cruel that all of the E.U. has already banned them.

These are just a few examples. McDonald's PR statement is rife with these types of vague and meaningless assertions that raise more questions than they answer, and that fall short of what the company's competitors are doing to improve the welfare of chickens raised for meat. While McDonald's switch to “controlled-atmosphere stunning” slaughter is a step in the right direction, the rest of its statement is little more than a PR attempt to convince consumers the company is doing more than it actually is.



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WHAT ARE OTHERS DOING?



These companies -and dozens more- are making precisely the following changes on the most important welfare issues for broiler chickens.



BREED

Transitioning to strains of birds with improved welfare outcomes accepted for use by RSPCA or Global Animal Partnership (GAP).



STOCKING DENSITY

Reducing stocking density to a maximum of 6 lbs./sq. foot.



LIVING CONDITIONS

Litter, lighting, and environmental enrichments that meets GAP's new standards.

WHAT IS MCDONALD'S DOING?



McDonald's, on the other hand, has announced only vague statements around these issues.



BREED

Nothing concrete, other than studying the issue.



STOCKING DENSITY

Nothing concrete, other than studying the issue.



LIVING CONDITIONS

Nothing mentioned on litter; current E.U. requirements for lighting; and vague mention of providing environmental enrichments (no specifics on quantity, etc.).

IN CONCLUSION

The current state of affairs for chickens raised for McDonald's menu items is unacceptable. These intelligent animals suffer day in and day out. Fortunately, nearly 100 food companies, including McDonald's competitors, are now requiring specific and meaningful reforms, and even major poultry producers are taking notice and implementing changes. We hope McDonald's follows suit.



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