

Male chick culling

Male chicks are considered a by-product in the laying hen sector. For that reason, millions of day-old male chicks are killed every year in hatcheries in the European Union by means of maceration or gasification. The problem was highlighted during a meeting of the Agriculture and Fisheries Council in October 2022, with some Member States calling for a ban on these practices. The European Commission responded positively to the call and has committed to carry out an impact assessment with a view to making a legislative proposal.

Background

Every year, almost [330 million](#) day-old male chicks are killed in hatcheries in the EU. The culling happens a few hours after hatching, as soon as the chicks have been sorted according to sex. While females are sent to farms to lay eggs, males are considered an undesirable by-product for both the egg industry, obviously, and the meat industry, as these chicks put on weight too slowly, and produce only small quantities of meat at slaughter age.

EU legal framework

According to [Council Regulation \(EC\) 1099/2009](#) on the protection of animals at the time of killing, the approved methods for slaughtering chicks up to 72 hours (so called 'day-old chicks') are maceration and gassing. A 2019 study by the European Food Safety Authority ([EFSA](#)) found, however, that maceration may fail to protect the welfare of such animals.

More specifically, EFSA identified certain risks to the protection of welfare during the maceration of chicks: slow rotation of blades or rollers, overloading of machinery, and rollers set too wide. This can result in failure to kill the chicks, leaving them conscious, and in pain, distress and fear.

Council of the EU

During the Agriculture and Fisheries Council meeting on 17 and 18 October 2022, the French and German delegations, on behalf of the Austrian, Belgian, Cypriot, Finnish, French, German, Irish, Luxembourgish and Portuguese delegations, presented a [paper](#) calling for an EU-wide ban on the systematic killing of male chicks. While recognising that the implementation of alternatives represents a major challenge for the sector, the note also asked the Commission to perform an impact assessment with the final goal of ending the practice. The paper noted that some Member States (namely Germany, France, Italy, Luxembourg and Austria) have already banned the procedure, and that an exchange of experiences had already taken place during the meeting of the Chief Veterinary Officers of the European Union in January 2022.

Already at the Council meeting of July 2021, Germany and France, with the support of Ireland, Spain, Luxembourg, Austria and Portugal, had asked the European Commission for an impact assessment regarding a possible EU-wide ban on the systematic killing of male chicks. In 2020, the German and French ministries of agriculture [committed](#) to end the practice of killing male chicks by the end of 2021, and did so.

European Commission

In response to the paper presented at the Council meeting, the Commissioner for Health and Food Safety Stella Kyriakides [expressed](#) her willingness to phase out this 'disturbing phenomenon'. Before proposing a phase-out, the European Commission confirmed its intention to perform an impact assessment, on both the short and the long-term challenges. The Commissioner recognised the increased costs producers are facing owing to the global economic climate, and committed to consider this in the impact assessment. At the same time, she called on the egg sector to develop more ethical and sustainable production systems.

The possible phase-out of male chick culling could be included in the [revision](#) of EU animal welfare legislation that the European Commission plans to conclude by the end of 2023. This revision is intended to align the legislation with the latest scientific evidence, and comes in response to the results of a fitness check that highlighted the need to revise current EU animal welfare legislation and bring it up to date.



Stakeholder positions

In June 2022, the animal welfare non-governmental organisation (NGO) [Eurogroup for Animals](#) sent an [open letter](#) to the members of the Agriculture and Fisheries Council. The organisation called for legislation at Member State level to ban the killing of day-old male chicks and female ducklings, and asked the Council members to support the adoption of an EU-wide ban in the forthcoming revision of EU farm animal welfare legislation.

Animal welfare NGO [Four Paws](#) welcomed the initiative taken by the German and French agriculture ministers at the Agriculture and Fisheries Council meeting on 17 October 2022. The association called on all agriculture ministers from all 27 Member States to support the German and French position, and invited the European Commission to set out a new legislative proposal, after completing an impact assessment of an EU-wide ban.

[Compassion in World Farming](#) echoed the support given to the paper. The association noted that citizens had called for a ban on the practice and asked for alternative solutions.

[ELPHA](#), the European Live Poultry and Poultry Hatching Egg Association, commented that the industry had been looking for solutions and alternatives for a long time but that there was no 'golden bullet'. The sector association highlighted the need for Member States to use a harmonised strategy, as competitiveness might be at stake.

European Parliament

In 2009, during the [consultation](#) procedure on the proposal for the Council regulation on the protection of animals at the time of killing (the current Council Regulation (EC) 1099/2009), the European Parliament proposed additional research to find alternatives to day-old chick slaughtering and asked for a ban on the procedure once appropriate alternatives had been found. Parliament's requests were not taken into account in the final text.

In more recent years, a number of Members of the European Parliament from different political groups have [put the practice](#) of shredding or gassing day-old chicks under the spotlight, asking the European Commission to [end day-old chick culling](#) in the EU and to look for [alternatives](#), such as *in-ovo* sexing. Some Members also [noted](#) that EFSA had identified hazards associated with the practice of shredding.

Possible solutions

In 2016, a Dutch [start-up](#) developed a screening machine for *in-ovo* sexing through a biomarker, as early as the ninth day of incubation.

In 2018, Compassion in World Farming gave a [German company](#) an innovation [award](#) for developing a method for sexing hatching eggs. The invention allows male hatching eggs to be recognised endocrinologically, and then rejected and turned into feed before the embryo develops the capacity to feel pain.

In 2020, an [Israeli start-up](#) developed software able to control the incubation process for chicken embryos, inducing the expression of the feminine gene over the masculine one and therefore controlling the sex development of the chick in favour of female development.

Hatcheries in France have been granted [€10 million in public funding](#) to install and start using *in-ovo* sexing apparatus, in order to achieve the goal of ending day-old chick culling by 2022.

Two additional solutions could be the rearing of the male chicks for meat, as the 19-farm organic producer group [EZ Fürstenhof](#) does in northeast Germany, or the use of dual-purpose breeds.