



Animal Welfare Institute

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COMPASSION  
in world farming 

October 20, 2022

Chad Gregory  
President & CEO  
United Egg Producers  
6455 East Johns Crossing, Suite 410  
Johns Creek, GA 30097

Dear Mr. Gregory,

We write on behalf of the Animal Welfare Institute (AWI), Compassion in World Farming and our supporters nationwide to encourage United Egg Producers to do more to protect the welfare of birds affected by Highly Pathogenic Avian Influenza (HPAI). AWI, founded in 1951, is a nonprofit organization dedicated to reducing animal suffering and promoting the welfare of animals, including those used in agriculture. AWI's work on behalf of farm animals includes issues related to the slaughter and depopulation of these animals. Compassion in World Farming, founded in 1967, is dedicated to reforming a broken food and farming system and introducing a more humane, fair, and sustainable one.

For over seven months, HPAI has spread throughout the United States, and 45 million birds have been killed in an effort to control the disease. Information AWI compiled from public records, communications with APHIS personnel, and video footage of active depopulations has revealed disturbing trends in depopulation practices during the 2022 HPAI outbreak. Namely, that the most inhumane method of depopulation—ventilation shutdown plus heat (VSD+) to induce heatstroke—has been used as a depopulation method in a majority of commercial depopulations, despite USDA policy that it should only be used when other, more humane methods, are not available.

Importantly, use of VSD+ is inconsistent with UEP guidelines. The guidelines list acceptable methods of depopulation and mandate that “*methods must cause rapid death or rapid loss of consciousness lasting until death or if loss of consciousness occurs more slowly, it must be induced in a manner that does not cause pain or panic.*” This guidance is clearly drawn from principles contained in the World Organisation for Animal Health (WOAH) *Terrestrial Animal Health Code*, Chapter 7.6: Killing of Animals for Disease Control Purposes, which is also referenced in UEP guidelines.

VSD+ does not meet these requirements. Published research indicates that, when carried out precisely following the USDA's protocol, chickens remain standing 3.5 hours after VSD+ is initiated, and their surface and core temperatures exceed established pain thresholds.<sup>1,2</sup> Severe heat stress and heatstroke are well known to profoundly compromise the welfare of birds and mammals,

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<sup>1</sup> Zhao, Y. et al. (2019) Modelling and validating the indoor environment and supplemental heat requirement during ventilation shutdown (VSD) for rapid depopulation of hens and turkeys. *Biosystems Engineering* 184:130-141.

<sup>2</sup> Hothersall, B. et al. (2011) Development of mechanical and thermal nociceptive threshold testing devices in unrestrained birds (broiler chickens). *Journal of Neuroscience Methods* 201:220-27.

a conclusion that is supported by review of video recordings of VSD+ performed under laboratory conditions.<sup>3</sup> Furthermore, state records, as well as video taken at two depopulation locations, show that VSD+ does not typically achieve 100% mortality, even when prolonged for eight hours. The profound animal welfare impacts of VSD+ illustrate why it is not listed as an acceptable method in WOAHP standards and has instead received international condemnation.<sup>4</sup> In fact, in response to a letter from Compassion in World Farming reporting the use of VSD+ in the United States to control HPAI, the director general of WOAHP stated, “We have contacted the WOAHP Delegate for the United States of America, encouraging them to implement methods that meet the General principle 6 of Article 7.6.1. of Chapter 7.6.”

Despite VSD+ being classified by the USDA as a last resort and an unacceptable method under UEP guidelines, public records show that between March and June of this year, VSD+ was the sole method used to depopulate 10 of the 27 flocks of table egg layers or breeders/pullets for which records are available—this amounts to nearly 7 million birds. In addition, VSD+ was one of multiple methods used in 15 depopulations during that time, and only two commercial depopulations were carried out without the use of VSD+. This makes it clear that VSD+ is being used preferentially by a majority of egg-producing poultry operations and that preparation and planning to enable the use of more humane methods is inadequate.

As the leading egg industry trade group, UEP has an opportunity to take the lead in ensuring that depopulations are carried out in the most humane manner possible. To this end, UEP should reiterate to its producers that VSD+ is not an acceptable method of depopulation. It should further seek to collaborate with the USDA and producers to ensure that preferred methods of depopulation—such as water-based foam (for non-battery cage production) and CO<sub>2</sub>—are readily accessible for future depopulations. It should also work to advance faster, more humane options that have been developed abroad, such as nitrogen gassing and nitrogen-filled, high-expansion foam.

Additionally, UEP must recognize and address the fact that increasing sizes of barns and egg production facilities are linked to both increased use of VSD+ and delay in the completion of depopulation. In many cases, preferred methods were rejected at large operations due to concern that they could not be carried out within the target deadline of 24–48 hours. In fact, AWI’s review of APHIS records showed that all depopulations involving more than 300,000 birds employed VSD+. In spite of resorting to VSD+, nearly all of these depopulations still exceeded the USDA’s deadline, some by a week or more.

While we recognize that productivity and promotion of the industry are top priorities for UEP, we hope that the health and welfare of birds will also be prioritized. We respectfully request that UEP take a firm position that VSD+ is an unacceptable depopulation method and facilitate the use of less

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<sup>3</sup> Mitchell, M.A. & Kettlewell, P.J (1998) Physiological stress and welfare of broiler chickens in transit: solutions not problems! *Poultry Science*, 77: 1803-1814.

<sup>4</sup> EFSA Panel on Animal Health and Welfare (2019) Killing for purposes other than slaughter: poultry. *European Food Safety Authority Journal*; Loeb, J. & Gray, A. (2022) Calls for ban on ventilation shutdown in USA. *Veterinary Record* 191: 97 (available at <https://bvajournals.onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/abs/10.1002/vetr.2085>).

cruel methods by recommending that producers reduce the number of birds in each poultry house, along with the overall size of each facility, as part of best management practices.

Thank you for your consideration. We look forward to hearing back from you soon.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Cathy Liss". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Cathy Liss  
President  
Animal Welfare Institute

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Ben Williamson". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Ben Williamson  
U.S. Executive Director  
Compassion in World Farming