THE RSPCA APPROVED FARMING SCHEME – BALANCING ANIMAL WELFARE, CONSUMER EXPECTATIONS AND COMMERCIAL REALITY

Ms. Melina Tensen *RSPCA Australia*

Summary

The RSPCA is pragmatic in its approach to improving animal welfare in Australia. We see that you can meet the needs of individual animals and, at the same time, provide humans with food and fibre, and that livestock industries can be productive and profitable.

The next decade is likely to see the interest in animal welfare increase. More and more consumers care about how their food is produced. Retailers and the wider food industry will respond by increasing the availability of higher welfare food, providing opportunities for producers to meet these new market demands. Higher animal welfare standards are likely to become a requirement for access into some markets.

In developing standards for RSPCA's Approved Farming Scheme, we are confronted with several challenges: ensuring that all our farms meet high animal welfare standards while balancing consumer expectations against what is achievable on the ground at a commercial scale to ensure the continued viability of the business. In addressing this challenge, the RSPCA's key concern is that animal welfare is not compromised in the on-going effort to meet consumer demand.

By raising public awareness of animal welfare-friendly production systems, the RSPCA's *Paw of Approval* provides a clear and unambiguous label for discerning consumers to seek out. At the same time, it provides encouragement to producers to move towards systems that aim to satisfy the animals' physical as well as fundamental behavioural needs. In so doing, achieving that balance between animal welfare, consumer expectations and commercial reality becomes a lot more workable.

The RSPCA Approved Farming Scheme – balancing animal welfare, consumer expectations and commercial reality

Most of you will agree that a good shopping experience generally equates to coming home with what you set out to buy. So, when it comes to bringing home the chicken wings, breast fillet or whatever it might be, what does the consumer set out to buy and, importantly, can they find it on the supermarket shelf?

There's a lot more to consumer purchasing behaviour than meets the eye. Sure, it's about price and nutritional value but increasingly country of origin, environmental impact and, yes, animal welfare are influencing this behaviour. So what are consumer expectations when it comes to animal welfare-friendly food and can these expectations be met by Australian producers?

The industrialisation of livestock farming has provided the consumer with a wide range of animal-derived food products at a very affordable price. Industrialisation, however, has also resulted in animals no longer being recognised as individual sentient beings, and instead becoming ultra-efficient production units often driven to the limits of their capacity, with the end product wrapped in plastic and sold on the supermarket shelf.

Recent research conducted by the agricultural industry-funded Centre for Food Integrity[1] in the United States found consumers are more likely to support farming activities if those activities are being conducted consistent with their expectations. By extension, if consumers don't believe that farming and associated activities are meeting their expectations, they are likely to push for change and greater controls by government.

In 2008, three and a half thousand members of the public in Victoria were asked to respond – spontaneously and without prompting – to the question "What is a good farmer". This is what they said: a good farmer is competent, a good farmer cares about the environment, is passionate and... a good farmer cares about animal welfare.

As far as the RSPCA is concerned, a farmer who cares about animal welfare is a farmer who provides animals with an environment that meets their physical and behavioural needs without unnecessary suffering or distress. While there are those who believe that there is no justification for humans to use animals at all and others who think that significant suffering and distress to animals can be justified, the RSPCA sits in the middle. We see that you can meet the needs of individual animals and, at the same time, provide humans with food and fibre, and that livestock industries can be productive and profitable. Overall, our approach to improving animal welfare in Australia is pragmatic.

Coming back to the Victorian survey, while the importance and ability of farmers to provide quality food was rated highly, there was a wider range of responses and a level of dissatisfaction expressed in relation to the performance on environmental sustainability and animal welfare issues.

There is a generally held view that city people have no understanding of farming and so therefore they have unrealistic expectations of what farmers can do to improve animal welfare or environmental sustainability. Interestingly, this survey found that those with some farming experience or knowledge were generally more likely to take action on issues that concerned them, including animal welfare, than those with little farming knowledge.

This survey also showed that the majority of people surveyed "took action" by changing their shopping behaviour followed by actions to convince others to change.

This changing shopping behaviour is confirmed by the most recent Australian FoodMAP released earlier this year. It found that products that offer a clear value proposition, including animal welfare values, have enjoyed growth over recent years[2]. This backs up research conducted by the Australia Institute last year that found that 59% of people care more now about how their food is produced than they did five years ago. And that 72% of consumers are willing to pay 20% more for humanely produced food[3]. The single biggest query to Coles' call centres relate to animal welfare and food production, with 85% of Coles' customers wanting to support more humane farming systems.[4]

A walk through any major supermarket supports these survey results – RSPCA-Approved chicken meat, pork, turkey and eggs are available in major supermarkets as are other products that seek to address animal welfare concerns as part of their offering to consumers. Indeed, the Australian Chicken Meat Federation[5] says the demand for free-range chicken has grown from almost none five years ago to around 15% of the total market in the last financial year.

So what does all this mean for chicken producers in Australia?

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[1] Centre for Food Integrity (2011) *2011 Consumer Trust Research*, p. 7.
[2] Spencer, S & Kneebone, M (2012), FOODmap: An analysis of the Australian food supply chain, Department of Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry, Canberra.
[3] The Australia Institute (2011)
[4] Coles (2011).
[5] http://www.chicken.org.au/industryprofile/page.php?id=3.3_Trends.

With around 98%[6] of Australian chicken meat production being consumed here in Australia, your product has to appeal to Australian consumers who, aside from quality, price and convenience, are very much interested in ethically produced food. And this is where the RSPCA Approved Farming Scheme provides an opportunity for Australian meat chicken producers.

The Approved Farming Scheme creates demand for welfare-friendly foods by raising public awareness and ensuring these foods are available on the supermarket shelf while at the same time, providing a strong incentive for producers to adopt alternative farming practices as demand for such products increases.

The Scheme includes animal welfare standards for layer hens, pigs, turkeys and, of course, meat chickens and sets a high level of welfare for the animals concerned.

Using the Five Freedoms as its framework, the Approved Farming Scheme standards require that animals, as well as having appropriate food, shelter and veterinary care, must have the freedom to express natural behaviour. In the case of meat chickens, standards were developed that require birds to be kept in a well-managed environment that provides for their behavioural and physical needs.

The key welfare issues in the production of meat chickens relate to the bird's fast growth rate as well as poor litter management. A typical RSPCA Approved farm provides meat chickens with sufficient light and space to encourage birds to move around, proper rest in a full dark period, and access to bales or perches to encourage birds to perch. In order to manage litter quality, stocking density is lower than that permitted under the Model Code and the ability to manage temperature, humidity and ventilation is an important aspect of the Scheme. Where birds have access to an outdoor area, this must have shade and provide birds with a sense of protection from aerial predators. Considerate handling, transportation and humane slaughter are also a key part of the Approved Farming Scheme.

Our chicken farms are assessed every 3 months in the first year and every 6 months in following years to ensure on-going compliance with the standards. Once a year we also observe the transport and slaughter process. These regular assessments are part of our guarantee to consumers that products sold under the Approved Farming Scheme have met high standards of animal welfare.

For the Scheme to work however, the standards cannot be developed in isolation. The latest animal welfare science can tell us a lot about the needs of meat chickens but it is not always useful in telling us about the needs of farmers. So, in developing production standards for the Scheme, we seek to engage farmers as much as possible early on in the process. We visit farms to get a good understanding of the different production systems – i.e. both conventional and alternative – and we explore the extent to which changes can be made to improve animal welfare. We essentially quiz farmers on every aspect of farm and animal management. In considering the available animal welfare science and current best practice, and also incorporating advice from technical experts and producers themselves, we ensure that the Approved Farming Scheme and the associated standards work for Australian farmers in the Australian farming context.

So, a key component of the Scheme is the need for it to be based in the commercial reality of farming today. It would be pointless to develop standards that could only ever be met by a small minority of farmers catering to a niche market, when our ultimate aim is to improve conditions for all meat chickens. In other words, we want you to keep producing chickens and we want you to be profitable when doing so – but we don't want it to happen at the expense of bird welfare.

[6] http://www.chicken.org.au/industryprofile/page.php?id=4.1_Overview.

In that respect, the RSPCA and our Approved Farming Scheme are in it for the long haul. We certainly recognise that change doesn't – and can't – happen overnight. We recognise that there is a cost associated with every change a farmer makes on farm and that somehow that cost must be recuperated. We recognise that consumer demand will dictate these changes and we know that consumers look to us for guidance on standards for animal welfare in livestock production. We see it as our job therefore to ensure that the Scheme is reviewed on a regular basis and remains relevant for Australian farmers who are looking to venture into high-welfare meat chicken production.

One RSPCA Approved meat chicken producer has told us of the changes they've noticed since joining the Scheme just over a year ago. Compared to their 'conventional' meat chickens, RSPCA birds have seen feed conversion rate improve by 8%, mortalities reduced by 1.1% and they are seeing less leg problems as a direct result of providing birds with more space and the opportunity to perch.

Now, assume that you are a chicken producer who has decided to join the Approved Farming Scheme. You can meet the standards and you've always had a genuine commitment to animal welfare. However, until now, you were reluctant to take the plunge because you weren't quite sure that there would be sufficient and sustaining demand for a more humanely farmed product.

As mentioned earlier, Australian concern about animals and animal welfare is on the rise. What we are seeing is an increasing number of more engaged, more connected consumers. Consumer behaviour is changing. People want more information about how their food is produced and the welfare of animals is becoming a key influencer in consumer purchasing decisions.

Supermarkets are stocking up on free-range products as a direct result of customer demand. In fact, retailer and fast-food outlet interest in alternative farming systems in general and the RSPCA standards in particular has been rather overwhelming. Certainly, five years ago we would never have seen this level of engagement and whether it is based on a genuine interest in animal welfare or simply taking advantage of a market opportunity, the result will be the same – an improvement in conditions for all farm animals.

So, in terms of meat chicken welfare, what is it the consumer is asking for? Ask any retailer and he will probably say 'free range'. Ask me and I will say 'RSPCA Approved'. The consumer has grown to associate 'free range' with good animal welfare. But good welfare is more than simply allowing animals access to the outdoors. There is – as yet - no legal definition for the term 'free range' so how can the consumer be confident that he's getting what he's asking for? We believe that retailers and industry alike need to take some responsibility to help clear the labelling confusion and ensure that free-range and all other animal welfare labelling is underpinned by minimum standards that explain what each term really means at the production level. Consumers need to be able to make an informed choice about the products they purchase but producers would also benefit from clear guidance with respect to minimum standards that have to be met under a certain production method.

The RSPCA is seeking to make it easy for consumers to identify product from more humane farming systems. The Approved Farming Scheme makes no distinction between different systems – be they indoor or outdoor - as long as they can satisfy the requirements of our standards. And we see no reason why a variety of alternative production systems should not continue to operate and their products be sold side-by-side on the supermarket shelf. So to make it easy for consumers to identify product from participants in the Scheme, the Paw of Approval gives consumers the RSPCA guarantee that high standards of animal welfare have been met.

Now, coming back to the farmer who is ready to join the Approved Farming Scheme, where does all this leave him – or her? Well, with his ability to meet the standards and with confidence in the growing consumer demand for humanely produced food, we believe it puts him in a position to take advantage of the power of the RSPCA brand. With 95% brand recognition and acknowledged as Australia's leading authority on animal welfare, consumers know to trust the RSPCA's credible and practical advice on farm animal production.

The RSPCA Paw of Approval is what counts. It provides a clear and unambiguous message to consumers – discerning consumers who are willing to pay more for humanely produced food. Not only that, these same consumers are looking to buy Australian grown – a concept the Approved Farming Scheme wholeheartedly supports. Not so long ago, consumer watchdog Choice, as part of their review of food endorsement programs, gave the RSPCA Paw of Approval a big "thumbs up" after scrutinising the claims behind 10 of Australia's most recognised health and sustainability logos[7].

With RSPCA Approved product available in over 2500 stores around the country, joining the Approved Farming Scheme not only makes good business sense but also allows you to benefit from our dedicated marketing resources.

Advertising the Scheme and promoting your brand in national food magazines, on billboards, at local butchers, on radio, etc. are just some of the ways in which consumers are directed to seek out the RSPCA Paw of Approval. As you can see, our 'How do you like yours?' advertising is positive and upbeat and celebrates the joys of eating.

So, to sum up, the RSPCA's Approved Farming Scheme strategy is to make sure consumers seeking humane food have that good shopping experience and can easily identify the higher welfare product of their choice. With increasing demand, producers will have a greater incentive to adopt alternative farming practices and in the long run, the RSPCA will have come a fair way in its mission to improve the lives of as many farm animals as possible while maintaining the livelihoods of Australian farmers and farming communities.

Every day of the year we can make a choice with our purchasing behaviour. Every day of the year, producers, retailers and consumers alike can make a choice that will make a difference to bird welfare. We believe that the RSPCA Paw of Approval will make that choice an easy one.

[7] Choice, March 2010, Food endorsement programs (incl. ACO, NASAA, Fairtrade, Heart Foundation tick, OGA, Rainforest Alliance, Dolphin safe, FREPA).