

# Bird Flu Slaughter

## AR Advocates Concerned About Probable Culling

By Mark Hawthorne

“Mass depopulation of poultry” is the euphemism the USDA is using to refer to the expected slaughter of millions of chickens and turkeys in this country to hinder the advance of the deadly H5N1 virus. Health agencies around the globe, including the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and the World Health Organization, believe it’s only a matter of time before the H5N1 strain of avian influenza, or “bird flu,” makes mad cow disease seem like a case of the sniffles. Scientists have predicted worst-case scenarios in which the virus kills more than a billion

people. Cases of the disease spreading from human to human have already been confirmed outside the country, and since the current control method of many highly pathogenic avian diseases is euthanasia, U.S. officials are currently preparing to cull millions of birds when the flu hits here.

Methods for the mass killing of caged hens and floor-raised birds currently under consideration include exposing them to carbon dioxide (CO<sub>2</sub>) gas within a secure area, such as under a tarp or in a polyethylene tent, and covering the birds

with CO<sub>2</sub>-enriched firefighting foam. Also under review is a portable CO<sub>2</sub> unit, called a MAK (modified-atmosphere killing) cart. All of these methods cause severe anxiety prior to a painful suffocation, but authorities may ignore such considerations when having to choose the most expedient, cost-effective and biosecure process. Egg-laying hens will be pulled from battery cages prior to being killed (further adding to their trauma), since the USDA considers it too difficult to remove birds once rigor mortis is established. Other countries have reportedly killed flocks using extremely cruel methods, including burning or burying the animals alive.

Setting aside for a moment the obvious ethical issue here—namely, extinguishing the lives of millions of already exploited animals to try to solve a problem directly linked to the intensive farming practices found in agribusiness—animal



Mark Hawthorne and rescued turkeys. Photo by Varina Heilman

advocates are urging government officials to adopt the least inhumane methods for killing diseased or at-risk birds.

In May 2006, animal protection groups gathered at the Stanislaus County Agricultural Center in California to watch a video showing authorities using both CO<sub>2</sub> and foam to contain an outbreak of avian influenza in 2004 on the Delmarva Peninsula (comprised of southern Delaware, eastern Maryland and part of Virginia), considered the birthplace of the U.S. poultry industry. A second meeting was held in the USDA building in Riverdale, Maryland in June.

Holly Cheever, DVM, of AVAR, has little hope that birds killed en masse will be treated humanely. "Sadly," she says, "though the USDA is trying to find the most humane approach, due to the numbers of animals involved, plus the fact that they have to work very fast and limit human contagion, it's not going to be 'euthanasia.'"

Dr. Cheever's report to the USDA on the depopulation demonstration she witnessed in Maryland states that the firefighting foam and CO<sub>2</sub> methods cause birds unnecessary suffering. She writes: "For the firefighting foam method, AVAR's concern is that death by suffocation is hardly benign or humane. By virtue of their being hidden from view and possibly unable to vocalize as they are covered with the foam, determining their degree of suffering becomes problematic. Also, although the birds do not seem to struggle as the wall of foam approaches them, their immobility should not be interpreted as a lack of stress or concern on the part of the birds. Finally, a board certified veterinary toxicologist states it is likely the chemical ingredients of the foam will cause irritation of the birds' eyes, mucous membranes, and skin."

As for CO<sub>2</sub> gassing, Dr. Cheever reports "The use of the MAK cart will stress the birds due to the extra handling by strangely-garbed humans and will cause aversive reactions to the pain of inhaling CO<sub>2</sub>. The whole house or tent gassing protocols all run the risk of having birds die by overheating and suffocation and if liquid CO<sub>2</sub> is used, the possibility of birds freezing to death before loss of consciousness is high."

Karen Davis of UPC was also disheartened by what she saw. Her report to the USDA notes that UPC is neither ethically nor scientifically in a position to "recommend" methods of mass-extminating birds. "We will therefore simply note some of the many welfare abuses and concerns identified by veterinarians and others, and reaffirm that if mass exterminations are to be conducted, they should be done in such a way as to reduce to an absolute minimum the unavoidable suffering of the birds, based on the most advanced welfare criteria, regardless of competing goals of cost savings and expediency." She lists the many reactions birds have to CO<sub>2</sub>, including gasping, shaking their heads, and stretching their necks to breathe. As for firefighting foam, Davis notes it is impossible to accurately determine the level of pain and distress the birds endure as they slowly suffocate in the foam.

**The Lesser Evil**

The least inhumane method for what the USDA is planning seems to be using inert gasses such as argon or nitrogen. Though not as readily available as CO<sub>2</sub>, inert gases are completely undetectable to birds. Dr. Ian Duncan, one of the world's leading experts in poultry welfare, calls inert gas "the most stress-free, humane method of killing poultry ever developed." AVAR and PETA regard controlled-atmosphere killing using a mixture of CO<sub>2</sub> and nitrogen or argon as the lesser of the evils in the government's arsenal and have made their recommendations known to the USDA.

"In our judgment, the availability of inert gas is not a legitimate obstacle to their use," says Noam Mohr, PETA's farmed animal researcher. "Inert gases like nitrogen are readily separated from the air. Nitrogen costs more than carbon dioxide, but the cost is not prohibitive, and considering the millions of animals likely impacted by the choice of gas, the cost should not keep us from doing the right thing." Mohr notes that while nitrogen is less readily available than carbon dioxide, "the purpose of USDA planning is to ensure that preparations are made before an emergency strikes."

*continued next page*

**Road's End Organics**  
The taste of childhood, all grown up!

VEGAN, ORGANIC, & DELICIOUS  
COMFORT FOODS

15% OFF @ WWW.CHREESE.COM  
Use Coupon Code SATYA0750 by 6/15/07  
or call 1.877.247.3373

USDA ORGANIC

**Available NOW**

Cynthia King Dance Studio®  
**Vegan Ballet Slippers**  
*Take a kind step for animals!*  
Made in Brooklyn!

1256 Prospect Ave., Brooklyn NY 11218 718-437-0101  
cynthia.king.dance.com

**Whole Foods Nutrition & Lifestyle**  
**Vegan Cooking Classes**  
**People-Pet Wellness & Animal Communication**

*Eat well, live well.*

Schedule your free phone consultation to learn about my multidimensional approach to good health.

**Julie Barone, HHC**  
845-338-4115  
PeoplePetWellness.com  
juliebarone@yahoo.com

# Bird Flu Slaughter

Continued from page 41

“When evaluating how best to kill large numbers of individuals I always factor in not just how long it takes to actually kill them, but what stress do they experience beforehand,” says Animal Place’s Kim Sturla, who watched the depopulation video in California. “Clearly, it is best that the killing be performed at the farm so the animals do not have to be transported. Secondly, the less amount of human handling the better. But sealing up broiler facilities before the CO<sub>2</sub> is administered takes hours, during which time the birds are frightened and slowly suffocate as their

and turkeys raised primarily for meat—to contain deadly bird flu,” Eggert told the Associated Press.

## Ignoring the Smoking Gun

Okay, back to the ethical issue: wiping out millions of animals to control a disease that the worldwide poultry industry created to begin with. The government and agribusiness obviously understand that intensive farming practices are directly connected to the spread of avian influenza, since outbreaks are common in animal factories worldwide. These enormous industrial

**As long as the USDA remains accountable only to industry interests, producers will continue to profit off of putting us all at risk.**

huge shed is gradually sealed off from all fresh air. The rise in temperature would be dramatic and is impacted by what time of year the ‘depopulation’ occurs.”

Karen Davis, meanwhile, is reluctant to endorse any method of killing chickens and turkeys, though she agrees argon gas may offer the birds the least amount of suffering. “From what I know from reading industry and scientific journals, attending seminars and such,” she says, “I ‘support’ the use of inert gases over other slaughter and mass-extirpation methods.”

The concerns of animal advocates, however, seem to be worth little. USDA spokesperson Karen Eggert says the agency can use any of the methods recommended by the American Veterinary Medical Association (AVMA). Trouble is, the AVMA doesn’t in fact have *any* recommendations for large-scale depopulation. “USDA has their own procedures in place for that,” explains the AVMA’s Michael San Filippo. “AVMA does not have recommendations yet, though it’s being talked about.”

In November, the government announced it has approved the use of firefighting foam. “Foam can be used to suffocate floor-reared flocks—chickens

and turkeys raised primarily for meat—to contain deadly bird flu,” Eggert told the Associated Press. This is clearly spelled out in a 2005 report on avian influenza by the World Health Organization: “Highly pathogenic viruses have no natural reservoir. Instead, they emerge by mutation when a virus, carried in its mild form by a wild bird, is introduced to poultry. Once in poultry, the previously stable virus begins to evolve rapidly, and can mutate, over an unpredictable period of time, into a highly lethal version of the same initially mild strain.”

Though a more recent report issued by GRAIN, a Spain-based NGO, says wild birds have been unfairly blamed for the spread of bird flu, the organization agrees factory farms are the smoking gun. “The evidence we see over and over again, from the Netherlands in 2003 to Japan in 2004 to Egypt in 2006, is that lethal bird flu breaks out in large-scale industrial chicken farms and then spreads,” says Devlin Kuyek, a researcher with GRAIN.

So why are governments and international agencies, like the UN Food and Agriculture Organization, not investigating how factory farms and their byproducts, such as

animal feed and manure, are responsible for spreading the avian flu virus? Instead, they are using the crisis as an opportunity to further industrialize the poultry market by eliminating small producers and introducing genetically modified chickens who will be resistant to the virus.

The animal groups concerned with this issue stress the need for a proactive approach that goes beyond merely seeking a “humane slaughter” for infected flocks. AVAR, PETA, and UPC have all encouraged the USDA to reduce crowding and improve unhygienic conditions for birds, though they aren’t betting it will happen. Karen Davis notes it is doubtful that government-industry will take the initiative to remedy the living conditions that predispose poultry to a broad range of virulent diseases. She writes in her report: “[The] government has likewise indicated that it will not shut down live poultry markets, although this would appear to be a prudent step consistent with the recurrent poultry disease epidemics in which live bird markets are implicated, and with the dire warnings of imminent human pandemics of avian influenza issued by governments around the world.”

“Poultry producers are unlikely to do much as long as the public remains ignorant about chicken factories, where birds live in filth so thick that it burns their skin and eyes,” says Noam Mohr. “As long as the USDA remains accountable only to industry interests, producers will continue to profit off of putting us all at risk.”

## What you can do:

1. Don’t support the poultry industry:  
Go vegan.

2. Contact the USDA:

Secretary Mike Johanns, USDA, 1400 Independence Ave, SW, Room 200-A, WA, DC 20250. Phone: (202) 720-3631, Fax: (202) 720-2166, Email: [agsec@usda.gov](mailto:agsec@usda.gov). Ask them to stop supporting farming practices that promote avian influenza and encourage them to use only inert gases for euthanasia of chickens and turkeys. ■

*Mark Hawthorne is an animal advocate and a contributing writer for Satya.*