Implementation of the RIRDC Broiler Welfare Audit to Industry

A report for the Rural Industries Research and Development Corporation

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June 2004

RIRDC Publication No 03/093
RIRDC Project No DAV-185A
Foreword

This project is the final phase of a larger program that involved two other projects conducted sequentially since 1998. The first project aimed to develop draft documentation for a welfare audit for the chicken meat industry that covered the hatchery, broilers, breeder rearers and breeder layers. The second part of the project was to finalise the draft documentation, undertake an on-farm evaluation and prepare documentation for the pick-up, transport and processing sectors of the chicken meat industry. These projects were completed in February 2001. This final project was to attempt to implement the audit process within a number of companies in the industry.

All projects were conducted with the assistance of a Management Group with representatives from industry, research and teaching, welfare groups and legislators. One of the major incidental achievements was developing good relationships between all representatives. Thus, industry and the RSPCA (Victorian Branch) clearly see each other’s perspectives on the issues, including the welfare issues, facing the industry.

This program of development and implementation of a welfare audit for the chicken meat industry has provided agreed audit questions and training materials for all sectors of the chicken meat industry and shown that implementation is both highly feasible and practical.

RIRDC recognises that while there are a number of audits that have been or are being developed for various aspects of the industry, it is obviously important that all these audits are eventually incorporated into a single quality assurance program. RIRDC’s involvement in this project is part of the Corporation's Chicken Meat Program’s key strategy of facilitating the adoption of best practice standards in animal welfare for the chicken meat industry and RIRDC recognises it has a future role in encouraging industry adoption.

This project was funded from industry revenue which is matched by funds provided by the Australian Government.

This report, an addition to RIRDC’s diverse range of over 1000 research publications, forms part of our Chicken Meat R&D program, which aims to support increased sustainability and profitability in the chicken meat industry by focusing research and development on those areas that will enable the industry to become more efficient and globally competitive and that will assist in the development of good industry and product images.

Most of our publications are available for viewing, downloading or purchasing online through our website:

• purchases at www.rirdc.gov.au/eshop

Simon Hearn
Managing Director
Rural Industries Research and Development Corporation
Acknowledgements

The following research staff from a number of research and teaching organisations contributed their knowledge and expertise of the broiler industry and animal welfare issues to the successful conclusion of this project and I am grateful for their support. The people were:

Dr. Andrew Almond, from the University of Melbourne
Mr. Peter Cransberg, from the Victorian Institute of Animal Science
Dr. Phil Glatz, from the South Australian Research and Development Corporation
Professor Paul Hemsworth, from the Animal Welfare Centre, University of Melbourne
Dr. Ellen Jongman, from the Animal Welfare Centre, Victorian Institute of Animal Science
Ms. Lisa Newman, from the Animal Welfare Centre, Victorian Institute of Animal Science
Dr. Greg Parkinson, from the Victorian Institute of Animal Science

In addition, the project was based around industry’s expertise and the vast experience of the broiler industry and legislative and community groups with an interest in animal welfare. The project could not have been undertaken without their support and willingness to work toward a common goal and I am indebted to the following people for their contributions:

Mr. David Bartlett, from Bartter Pty. Ltd.
Dr. Onn Ben-David, from the Royal Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals
Mr. Tony Campigli, from Bartter Pty. Ltd.
Mr. Ian Green, from Inghams Enterprises Pty. Ltd.
Dr. Stephen Tate, from the Bureau of Animal Welfare, Department of Natural Resources and Environment
Mr. John Clarke, from the Victorian Farmers Federation

Furthermore, a number of industry people gave their support during the project and feedback on the draft final documentation. Their support is gratefully acknowledged.
Executive Summary

This project and the preceding projects on developing and implementing a welfare audit were developed to help fulfil both industry’s and the community’s expectations of high levels of quality assurance associated with chicken meat production. The ‘Welfare Audit for the Chicken Meat Industry’ has been developed with a specific focus on conditions in SE Australia, but would require only minor modifications for use in other climatic zones. Quality Assurance programs within industry currently focus predominantly on animal health and food safety and there is a need, coinciding with a more informed and demanding customer base, to expand these programs to include animal welfare issues so that industry remains sustainable into the next century. Similarly, there will be a need in the future to include environmental audits into Quality Assurance programs. A large number of the issues that breeders focus on daily, including animal health, production and food safety, also relate to animal welfare, although this information was not previously formalised within one document. Broiler companies already provide considerable information on maintaining high levels of animal welfare and producers, in their daily tasks, already largely implement this information.

The documents that comprise the project were put together by a Management Group comprising representatives of commercial companies, farmer groups, animal welfare and legislative groups, and teaching and research organisations. There were three types of questions addressed in the development of these materials:

i) Critical questions which are defined as those where ‘if something goes wrong the birds are irrevocably damaged’. These questions refer to actions that must be complied with to pass an audit.

ii) Good practice questions (two types) that reflect the current state of knowledge and its practical implementation in the industry. The purpose of a number of these good practice questions is, in part, educational, but also to provide an indication of changed practices for the future. For example, few poultry farmers directly measure gas and dust levels. However, there is an increasing requirement for this overseas and it is occurring in some pig farms in Australia. Thus, it is likely to be a requirement in Australia in the future and information is provided on what these levels may be and how they can be measured.

There are two types of good practice questions addressed:

- Those that can be measured or directly observed. These questions refer to actions that must be complied with to pass an audit.

- Those which indicate practices which should be observed, but are difficult to verify. These questions refer to actions that do not have to be complied with to pass an audit.

Wherever possible, targets have been developed for specific issues, such as temperature requirements, stocking density, inspection frequency, feed and light regimes, transport times and handling. In most cases these targets reflect good industry practice and are considered achievable by the majority of industry. However, in some individual cases the targets will not be achievable and thus may not be applicable to individual enterprises. For example, it is recognised that in some older sheds when outdoor temperatures are low overnight, the shed temperature may fall below the target recommendation to about 14 °C. This is unlikely to have any welfare significance because older birds are tolerant of cold temperatures, although there will be a cost in terms of increased feed intake. In such a situation it will be necessary to specify a revised target that does not compromise welfare, and revised targets will need to be negotiated with company veterinarians and technical advisers. For those farms not achieving compliance to an agreed standard, procedures need to be put in place that specify actions and the time frame to achieve compliance.
Supporting information is provided on the purpose of the individual audit questions and some explanatory material that provides information on the impact of various issues on welfare. The ‘purpose’ of the audit questions indicates both the relevant parts of the Codes of Practice that set minimum standards that should be complied with, and additional objectives that the questions are designed to achieve, although these may not be specifically mentioned in the Codes of Practice. As indicated above, many questions are designed to have standards that are higher than those in the Codes of Practice, reflecting industry’s current practices and these ‘target recommendations’ are described and discussed. The audit documentation has been pilot-tested, part of the ‘broiler’ documentation has been evaluated and all the documentation was circulated to a number of individuals and companies with an interest in the chicken meat industry. The feedback obtained from the participants has been incorporated into the final documentation.

The five audit booklets are provided for industry in a ring-bound folder as well as on CD. The five booklets are independent documents for the hatchery, broiler, breeder rearer, broiler breeder and pick-up, processing and transport sectors of the chicken meat industry. Each booklet is comprised of the following:

- A preface, purpose and background, including information on what growers/unit managers are responsible for and notes for auditors.
- A set of audit questions for the different aspects of the enterprise and record keeping checklists.
- The purpose, rationale and background information on audit questions including relevant sections of the Codes of Practice and the impact of issues on welfare.
- Appendices on further reading and training courses, perspectives on the chicken meat industry, members of the Management Group and example recording sheets for farmers/pick-up crews/unit managers.

In the current project, an attempt was made to introduce the welfare audit on commercial farms. The research team worked with five commercial companies to this effect. Two national companies (at the time, representing over 70% of the birds in Australia) indicated that they saw few barriers that would prevent them from adopting the audit nationally. Two predominantly State-based companies (at the time of conduct of this project) indicated they will also adopt the audit. Another State based company also intended to incorporate the welfare audit into their in-house QA program.

There was general agreement among all participants on the value of the welfare audit. Some of the barriers to adoption were seen to be a lack of incentives to be involved in a voluntary scheme, the level of record keeping required, confidentiality issues, penalties for non-compliance and fear of change. Some suggestions to overcome the barriers were: simple record keeping that covers all aspects of QA, the use of external auditors to provide credibility, developing an agreed and proactive position by company and grower representatives on implementation, providing incentives, at least in the form of some recognition for participation and compliance, if not monetary, and to commence with a voluntary scheme that moves towards a compulsory scheme. While most of the above are company issues, there are also some industry issues that need to be discussed collectively, particularly industry versus company adoption, developing a welfare logo and the keeping of industry statistics.

The issue of non-compliance is a complex issue. The scheme is voluntary and the intention of the audit is to both improve welfare and to maintain high standards of welfare across the whole industry. This is to be achieved on the basis of a continual improvement program that meets a set of industry-agreed targets. It needs to be recognised that the targets cannot be and should not be seen as being immoveable and that circumstances in particular companies or at different times of year may preclude targets being met. Thus, there needs to be flexibility in determining compliance. Providing companies can show due diligence in relation to the intent of the welfare audit, by recognising problems and putting in procedures that attempt to solve problems, they should be seen as complying, although it may not be possible to meet the standards. It needs to be considered if the recording sheets should
include a statement of due diligence as a way of overcoming the problem of not meeting certain targets, while at the same time providing evidence of working towards achieving them.

Based on the experiences in implementing the audit there is one major recommendation. This is that:

- RIRDC organise a workshop to examine some of the barriers to national adoption of the ‘Welfare Audit for the Chicken Meat Industry’ and to provide the impetus for industry-wide adoption.

In the opinion of the author, it is anticipated that only a little further encouragement is required to achieve wide industry implementation. It is recognised that it may not be possible to achieve 100% uptake of any initiative in a deregulated market. The chicken meat industry is not alone in grappling with this issue, but initiative uptake by major companies that represent the majority of birds should be both encouraged and promoted to ensure the industry remains sustainable.

It is hoped that the audit documentation will fulfil several aims. Most importantly, it will serve to demonstrate high standards of animal welfare. However, in achieving this objective there are also a number of subsidiary aims, including improved awareness by industry personnel of the interactions between production and welfare, an improved ability by industry participants to act as spokespersons for their industry on both welfare and other quality assurance issues, and a recognition that welfare is not static and can be continually improved.

Finally, it is to be hoped that, in time, the achievement of welfare objectives will not be seen as a separate, albeit important, ‘chore’. Instead, welfare will automatically be taken into account when it becomes integrated into farm and animal management, which are the predominant activities of farmers that have an impact on welfare.
1. Introduction

A major threat to intensive animal production is the unwanted and often-unwarranted attention focussed on possible lack of care of individual animals within a large farm. Recent examples of these are in the pig industry and the laying hen industry where ‘animal-liberation raids’ and attendant publicity have resulted. While it is acknowledged that some sectors of the broiler industry already have procedures in place to demonstrate that production standards and requirements are being met and to identify problems throughout production, industry is not maximising the benefits from its current activities. For example, there is no coherent plan for welfare quality assurance; therefore, few people outside the industry realise the current efforts of the industry in relation to welfare issues.

Participation by industry in an approved audit process can serve to achieve several benefits. It provides documented evidence of high quality animal care by identifying and monitoring equipment, animal and personnel issues associated with quality animal care. If thoroughly utilised at the farm level, the audit process is likely to lead to an improvement in husbandry practices.

The audit provides appropriate documentation on agreed standards of welfare within the constraints of current production systems that can be incorporated into a quality assurance program. Sectors of the broiler industry already utilise ‘in-house’ compliance documentation and are audited by retailers for product quality and safety. Welfare audits are therefore a logical extension of such developments.

Audit documentation does not represent definitive standards for housing, transport, slaughter and husbandry of animals. In the chicken meat industry, some controversial issues are stocking densities and the possible increase in leg problems as a result of selection for fast growth rates. The welfare audit does not set new standards for these issues but reflects currently acceptable practices so that welfare is as high as possible whilst taking into account any limitations of the production system(s).

Development and use by industry of appropriate (agreed) documentation that can indicate the adequacy or otherwise of farm welfare standards will serve to raise or maintain high welfare standards within the industry and defuse potential threats. Audit documentation for animal care also has the ability to provide certainty for all personnel involved in the industry so that the industry, service personnel, veterinarians and any internal or external auditors are asking the same questions in terms of animal care. The implementation of audit documentation is also likely to result in improved production because of the demonstrated link between welfare and production, as has been demonstrated in a previous project (“A welfare audit for the broiler industry: pick-up, transport and processing”, RIRDC, February 2001, project DAV-162A) which showed reduced mortality in the first week after placement following implementation of the audit documentation at broiler farms.

This current report focuses on aspects of implementation of the previously prepared documentation titled “A welfare audit for the chicken meat industry”.
2. Objectives

- To achieve the adoption of audit procedures for welfare by four out of the six companies operating in Victoria at the time that this work was conducted, and two of the three companies in SA.

- 20% of growers and transporters and 40% of breeder farms, rearing farms, hatcheries and processing plants in Victoria and SA to be participating in the audit procedure on a regular basis by the end of the project; this participation to be on the basis of incorporation of the welfare audit into each group's own quality assurance program or its independent use.
3. Implementing a welfare audit for the broiler industry

3.1 Introduction

Previous projects in this development program have provided comprehensive welfare audit documentation for the chicken meat industry. These projects were “A welfare audit for the broiler industry” (RIRDC, August 1999, DAV-147A) and “A welfare audit for the broiler industry: pick-up, transport and processing” (RIRDC, February 2001, DAV-162A). Included in the second project (DAV-162A) was an evaluation of part of the broiler audit documentation at 24 broiler farms which showed a significantly lower mortality (1.37% vs 1.74 %) in the first week after placement, as well as an expected better level of record keeping. While a reduced mortality can be considered a welfare benefit, and some production advantage may be expected from implementing the welfare audit because of the close link between welfare and production, any production advantage should be considered a bonus from the implementation of the welfare audit.

A welfare audit is seen as having a number of advantages. These include: an immediate improvement in animal welfare; public reassurance of high welfare standards; market protection and development by having systems in place to minimise industry-wide risks; a mechanism for recommending upgrades to welfare codes of practice; generally higher standards of animal welfare than the minimum standards currently in the relevant codes of practice; demonstrated industry commitment to welfare; continual improvement in animal welfare; and certainty for all. Intangible benefits from participation in such an audit program may include: improved production; better maintenance of equipment; fewer crises; improved staff training; less focus on the industry by government, welfare groups and the public; improved relationships between industry and welfare groups; the potential to reduce conflict between industry, government and welfare groups; and improved industry sustainability.

Having developed the “Welfare audit for the chicken meat industry”, the challenge was to see it implemented on commercial farms. This project was to undertaken to encourage implementation of the audit program by industry and to document some of the barriers to adoption.

3.2 Materials and methods

There were two elements to this project. The most important was working with chicken meat companies who agreed to implement the audit documentation, at least at some of their farms and across a number of the industry sectors (hatchery, broilers, breeder rearers, breeder layers and pick-up, transport and processing). All companies were approached, seeking their involvement in implementing the welfare audit, notwithstanding that it was anticipated that not all would want to be involved as welfare, while considered important, was not the highest of industry’s concerns. It was also recognised that the research team would have been unable to service all companies given the resources available to the project. To manage the implementation project within the above constraints the research team worked with a limited number of companies (identified in Table 1).

The second element was to maintain awareness of the project on an industry-wide basis. This was done by firstly producing a CD about the project that was sent out to all chicken meat companies and industry organisations and, secondly, having an official ‘launch’ of the project accompanied by media releases and an article for industry journals.
At the end of the project period, company personnel involved in the implementation were asked several standard questions in relation to implementing the welfare audit. These were:

“Based on your experiences on the Management Group and your knowledge of the industry and where it is going, do you think the welfare audit will be incorporated into company QA documentation:

i) YOUR COMPANY LOCALLY
   - highly likely
   - likely
   - neither likely nor unlikely
   - unlikely
   - very unlikely

ii) YOUR COMPANY NATIONALLY
    - highly likely
    - likely
    - neither likely nor unlikely
    - unlikely
    - very unlikely

iii) INDUSTRY-WIDE NATIONALLY
     - highly likely
     - likely
     - neither likely nor unlikely
     - unlikely
     - very unlikely”

They were also asked about barriers to adoption and suggestions to overcome any barriers. In regard to the latter, their opinions on the value of a national workshop were sought.

3.3 Results

3.3.1 Modifications to audit documentation

During implementation of the audit, there was a need to make minor revisions to the most recently released booklet, which was on pick-up, transport and processing. For example, it was necessary to distinguish between birds carried over a distance (five birds per hand) and birds that are virtually lifted and placed in containers where current practice for crates that hold 12 birds, is to lift six birds per hand.

3.3.2 Company implementation

The welfare audit was implemented by the companies identified by code in Table 1.

Table 1. Companies involved in implementing the chicken meat welfare audit and their initial commitment.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Company</th>
<th>Comments</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A</td>
<td>Agreed to implement predominantly in Victoria with some further trialing in NSW.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B</td>
<td>Intended to implement firstly for the hatchery and for pick-up and for other areas about two months after commencement. Currently has a HACCP-based system and the audit needs to fit this.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C</td>
<td>Agreed that the audit would be introduced across the company. The welfare component would be incorporated into current ISO audits for their hatchery, broiler, broiler breeder and breeder rearer farms. Currently do not have ISO for pick-up and transport, although these are on the agenda and the welfare documentation will provide some impetus to develop appropriate ISO auditing for these activities.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>D</td>
<td>This is a small company and could see immediate benefits. They intended to immediately introduce the audit to some of their broiler farms.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>E</td>
<td>This company was a late entrant to the project. They intended to trial the audit at a number of broiler farms.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Subsequent to completion of this project, the operations of several of the above companies have been taken over by another company.
Constraints – company specific

As well as a number of general constraints (see below), some companies had specific constraints.

Company A has implemented the audit at their own facilities, but prior to introduction to broiler farms, they wanted to incorporate the audit questions into a revised company recording sheet so that farmers only have a single recording sheet. This has taken longer than anticipated and has been further exacerbated by the company also ensuring the reporting requirements for ‘Chicken Care’ were on the single reporting sheet. Company B has done widespread trialing of the welfare audit. As for company A, it wished to develop a single recording sheet. Company C seemed to be able to incorporate the welfare audit into their current ISO system relatively simply. However, company C was taken over during the year subsequent to the conduct of this project and the new parent company was not currently interested in implementing the welfare audit. While company D could see immediate benefits of the welfare audit and could introduce it immediately for broiler growers, they saw some constraints for other areas such as the processing plant. Company E was a late entrant to the project because of staff changes they wished to make prior to attempting to introduce the audit. They intended to introduce the audit to a number of broiler farms.

Constraints – general

In discussions with all the companies involved in the audit project, there were a number of common concerns raised by several, if not all, companies. These were:

- Rewards for compliance and disincentives for non-compliance. This is a difficult issue, but at the end of the day what is being asked regarding welfare is not atypical of what is likely to be asked of all farmers regarding record keeping for other elements of quality assurance. Thus, implementation of the chicken meat welfare audit provides good training for the future. There will be a greater demand on producers for record keeping and to incorporate other issues into their QA programs in the future eg. product safety, biosecurity and environment. One of the best incentives is for retailers to only use company/farms that comply with the welfare audit as preferred suppliers.

- Effort needs to be put into getting retailers to give preferential status to suppliers who comply.

- A mechanism needs to be developed to ensure capture and public awareness of national data re QA compliance.

- There is a considerable need for public education and more openness by the industry. Issues such as the belief that hormones are used in chicken meat production are an ongoing irritation. More openness by industry on both the good things they are doing and discussion of some of the problems should help put industry in a better light.

- While welfare is considered very important the industry is faced with a number of issues that can, at times, have a greater immediacy and thus lower the priority put on implementation of the welfare audit eg. deregulation, siting guidelines, importation issues, manure handling, environmental issues etc.

- Exposure of the industry through the implementation of audits can have undesirable effects, such as taking individual issues out of context and focussing on individual practices rather than the welfare audit and what it covers as a whole.

Progress towards implementation

Company A has trialled the audit at the hatchery and breeder/rearer farms. It sees no problem with implementation as these company facilities keep good records. It is a question of modifying its recording sheets to ensure that all items in the welfare audit are incorporated. This is in hand. There have been several meetings with grower representatives. They do not have any problems with the concept and mainly want to ensure that record keeping is as simple as possible. Their experiences were that ticking many items is of little value. There was a recognised need to keep some records (eg. stocking density, temperature etc.) but once they had completed the tick-sheets for a week they knew what was in them and believed daily ticking to be cumbersome. This was particularly the case for items such as adjusting feeders, adjusting drinkers, smell of ammonia etc. In discussions, it was agreed
that rather than ticking every item in the example record sheets, many of the questions could be incorporated into a one line statement that is dated and initialled, indicating that the farmer has complied with the audit requirements and documented any problems for the day. There could also be space for company service personnel to sign on the days of their visits that they either agree or disagree with the grower. For example, the statement could be along the lines of “I have complied with all items listed on company welfare audit sheet number x (this specifies the agreed questions) except for the items listed in the adjacent column.” (space for date, signature and service personnel signature and agreement/disagreement). The growers and the company have agreed for the company to draft an updated recording sheet and then they will work with the company to modify it, if required, and work with the company to encourage all growers to use it. The only barrier the company sees that would impact on national adoption is that it has some disagreement with some of the targets. This company supplies about 25 % of the market in Victoria and 30 % nationally.

Company B has indicated its intention to introduce the welfare audit nationally. In accordance with company policy, each State was asked to develop its own HACCP-based recording sheet for the hatchery, breeder layers/rearers and broilers. These have been done by company staff for hatchery and breeder layers/rearers and by service staff and growers for broilers. It was the company’s intention to amalgamate these into single company record documents for welfare for each sector for use nationally. It is likely that for broiler growers the sheets will be expanded to include occupational health and safety issues and, later, product safety issues, as the company believed that the latter will be required by their larger customers. This company supplies about 30-35% of the market in Victoria and 48 % nationally.

Company C was initially involved in implementing the welfare audit. Like company D they already had an ISO certification process in place and saw no difficulties in incorporating the welfare audit. They have farmer groups who administer ISO for the growers and breeders and these groups were asked to delete anything from the documentation that was not already being recorded. What was left would have been the welfare audit for ISO certification. It was intended to introduce the welfare audit for the hatchery, broiler, breeder and breeder rearer sectors of the company. At the time this project was conducted, this company did not have ISO for pick-up and transport sectors, although these were on its agenda. The welfare documentation would have provided some impetus to develop appropriate ISO auditing for these activities. However, the company was taken over during the year and the new parent company was not currently interested in pursuing the welfare audit implementation.

Company D, a predominantly State-based company, has recently commenced its second official ISO audit and incorporated the welfare audit into it for the first time for 70 % of its farms. The reason for incorporating only 70 % of broiler farms is that it was at the time contracting more grower farms to expand its level of processing and intended to incorporate these new farms into the company ISO certification process. This company purchased birds from another company so that the hatchery and breeder layer/rearer sections of the welfare audit were not relevant. It planned to incorporate the welfare audit into lairage and later on into the processing sector of its operations. This company supplies about 15-20 % of its State’s market.

Company E is predominantly a State-based company and agreed to implement the audit at its facilities. At the time of reporting, it was working on incorporating the audit questions into its record keeping requirements. This company supplies about 25-30 % of its State’s market.

In relation to questions on the likelihood of implementation of the welfare audit, the responses were as follows: four of the companies indicated they were highly likely to implement the welfare audit locally. The two national companies also thought it highly likely they would implement it nationally. One company was equivocal. None of the companies were prepared to comment on the likelihood of adoption by industry as a whole.

The participating companies agreed that a workshop to encourage industry-wide adoption would be useful.
3.3.3 Development of a CD about the welfare audit

A 12-minute CD was scripted and developed and sent out to all chicken meat companies and industry organisations. The CD focuses on the need for incorporating welfare into industry QA programs, benefits of implementation and what is expected of farmers/unit managers in terms of daily record keeping. The script for the CD and copies of the images used are in Appendix 1.

3.3.4 Launch of the welfare audit

On 23rd October 2001 the Victorian Minister for Agriculture officially launched the ‘Welfare Audit for the Chicken Meat Industry at the Victorian Institute of Animal Science. There were 100 invitees of whom 50 attended. The media release that was developed for the event appears at Appendix 2.

In addition to the above media release which was predominantly developed for newspapers, a more comprehensive media release based on an industry article was prepared for industry journals which would have also received the media releases and some photos from the event (see Appendix 3).

The media release appeared in the Herald Sun (24th October 2001, page 28) and the Weekly Times (24th October 2001, page 3) and the industry article appeared in the Poultry Digest (volume 17(2) pages 6 and 44-45).

3.4 Discussion

While this project did not fully meet all of its ambitious objectives, it has shown that implementation is both highly feasible and practical. There is already a commitment by companies representing 70-80% of the national flock to fully implement the welfare audit, with the proviso from one company that some of the targets be reviewed. This project was the final stage of a three-part project to develop and implement a welfare audit in the chicken meat industry. This final stage focussed on implementation and involved interacting with a limited number of companies to encourage adoption and determine some of the barriers to adoption for the wider industry. During this phase of the project one area of the original documentation was identified for modification; this mainly involved defining the term carrying birds in relation to pick-up to distinguish lifting and placing into containers from lifting, walking and placing birds into containers. Considering the large volume of material provided, this was a pleasing finding that indicates both the rigour and practicality of the documentation.

In implementing the audit documentation, some companies showed/provided the appropriate sector booklet to their staff (employees and contractors) in the different sectors. The response to the concept of a welfare audit was generally favourable and did not appear to be threatening because of industry participants’ familiarity with record keeping and the recognised importance of welfare to the industry. However, there was some initial concern about the potential paperwork, particularly based on the amount of material that was presented. In hindsight, it would probably have been better to provide the material to participants in two sections, firstly the recording sheets and secondly access to the complete document, for purposes of information, either as hard copy or as a CD, depending on the participant’s preference. In this way, participants would have more clearly seen that the task was not too onerous and that the documentation was designed to fit around their work in that it focussed on welfare via animal and facility management.

While all companies in Australia were contacted to ascertain their interest in implementation, the reality was that only those involved in the Management Group took part in implementation. While there was no active encouragement of others, as this made the project manageable, it is probably not surprising that those actively involved in the process were more willing to participate. Nevertheless, it does raise the issue of industry-wide participation. To maximise the benefits of developing the welfare audit, the preferred option is industry-wide adoption. Nevertheless, until such a stage is reached, there are obviously benefits to individual companies and in time such implementation by individual
companies and hopefully an acceptance by retailers, will encourage others to adopt welfare into their QA programs. Further work is required to encourage industry-wide adoption and one recommendation from this project is that RIRDC organise a workshop to examine some of the barriers to national adoption of the ‘Welfare Audit for the Chicken Meat Industry’ and to provide the impetus for industry-wide adoption. Industry should also be holding discussions with retailers to form alliances that include welfare in their quality assured products. This would meet any retail requirements to assure customers that welfare is addressed and is considered important by industry. Also, retailers, in providing assurances on quality issues such as food safety and welfare, can directly influence other companies to participate.

Some of the barriers were seen as lack of incentives to be involved in a voluntary scheme, the level of record keeping, a minor number of the targets, confidentiality, penalties for non-compliance and fear of change. Some suggestions to overcome the barriers were simple record keeping that covers all aspects of QA, the use of external auditors to provide credibility, developing an agreed and proactive position by company and grower representatives on implementation, providing incentives in the form of payment or at least some form of recognition for participation and compliance and commence with a voluntary scheme that moves towards a compulsory scheme (ie. as contracts come up for renewal). While most of the above are company issues, there are also some industry issues that need to be discussed collectively, particularly industry versus company adoption, developing a welfare logo and keeping industry statistics.

The issue of non-compliance is a complex one. The scheme is voluntary and the intention of the audit is to both improve welfare and maintain high standards of welfare across the whole of industry. This is to be achieved on the basis of a continual improvement program that meets a set of industry-agreed targets. It needs to be recognised that the targets cannot be and should not be seen as being immovable and that circumstances in particular companies or at different times of year may preclude targets being met. Thus, there needs to be flexibility in determining compliance. Providing companies can show due diligence in relation to the intent of the welfare audit, by recognising problems and putting in procedures that attempt to solve problems, they should be seen as complying, although it may not be possible to meet the standards. It needs to be considered if the recording sheets should include a statement of due diligence as a way of overcoming the problem of not meeting certain targets while at the same time providing evidence of working towards achieving them.

In relation to wider adoption, the reporting of the project, following an official launch by the Victorian Minister for Agriculture, should provide an industry awareness and this awareness can be built on by holding an industry workshop to encourage implementation. While there is recognition of the importance of welfare to the industry, there are other priorities that can serve to move implementation of the welfare audit down companies’ lists of priorities eg. deregulation, siting guidelines, importation issues, manure handling and environmental issues. While this is understandable, at the same time it would probably only take a little encouragement to ensure a wide adoption of the welfare audit by industry.

There are reports that a small sector of the industry that buys relatively small numbers of birds to supply local markets is growing. While there is the ongoing issue of small players not being willing to participate in the welfare audit, this is not restricted to welfare. It raises the issue of defining the industry and who the industry organisations service. In deregulated markets, it may well be impossible to achieve 100% uptake of any initiative, notwithstanding the threat that non-participants may represent. The chicken meat industry is not alone in grappling with this issue, but initiative uptake by major companies that represent the majority of birds should be both encouraged and promoted to ensure the industry remains sustainable.
4. Implications

There are some short term and long term benefits of the project. The short term benefits are those to be gained from advertising industry’s proactive position on animal welfare with welfare groups, the public, the retail sector and relevant state and federal government bodies. The long term benefits will only be achieved by implementation of the audit process. These benefits will include an ability by industry to demonstrate compliance with the Code of Practice and relevant targets, improvements in compliance levels with targets over time, an ability to identify and solve problems on individual farms and where necessary initiate industry education on specific issues and by these actions a reassurance for the public on welfare standards within the chicken meat industry. Some indirect implications are the benefits that may be achieved for export markets by a similar audit process being developed and adopted for other animal industries.

5. Recommendations

- RIRDC organise a workshop to examine some of the barriers to national adoption of the ‘Welfare Audit for the Chicken Meat Industry’ and to provide the impetus for industry-wide adoption.

- Companies form alliances with retailers to encourage companies implementing the welfare audit to be preferred/sole suppliers. While this may provide an initial market advantage, more importantly it will encourage other companies to adopt the welfare audit.

A possible format for the workshop is as follows:

Background to the project and some issues raised along the way
- Introducing the welfare audit in a commercial company
- A grower's perspective of the welfare audit and future QA requirements
- Industry perspective on QA and the industry's future
- RIRDC perspective on QA and the industry's future
- RSPCA's perspective of the welfare audit and the industry

The speakers would be used to raise a number of issues for general discussion including:
- Industry sustainability and image (including how to address any international welfare campaign against industry)
- Advantages/disadvantages of implementing the audit in the industry
- Barriers to adoption and overcoming the barriers
- QA in the industry
- Welfare Logo/incentives
- National register
- Alliances with retailers

Invitees would probably be company general managers or their nominee and they would be asked to invite a company farm manager and grower representative. In this way the size would be manageable and people present should have sufficient authority to keep things moving.
6. Communication strategies

The development of a communications strategy is considered essential for this project to be realized. During the development of this industry package, the Management Group has been mindful of the need for an appropriate extension process to both encourage uptake of the welfare audit procedure and to maximize the benefits to industry by such an uptake.

Communications with companies in Victoria and South Australia that have been involved in implementing the welfare audit have been good and obviously these companies are more aware of the project than those companies not participating. To successfully implement the audit on a national basis will require a strategy to encourage adoption, report on benefits and maintain an interest. A communications strategy should be developed by industry, perhaps in conjunction with RIRDC.

One suggestion regarding communications is to nominate a professional communications strategy development officer to coordinate and develop appropriate communications strategies for the different target audiences (i.e. companies in general, company QA staff, farmers/unit managers, etc.). As a first step this should be considered at a RIRDC sponsored workshop for the chicken meat industry on national implementation of the welfare audit (see recommendations above).
7. Appendices

7.1 Appendix 1: Script of Promotional CD about the welfare audit for the chicken meat industry

ABOUT THE WELFARE AUDIT FOR THE CHICKEN MEAT INDUSTRY - a 12 minute CD

A professional auditing package developed for the Australian Chicken Meat Industry by the Animal Welfare Centre, Department of Natural Resources and Environment, The University of Melbourne, South Australian Research and Development Institute and Rural Industries Research and Development Corporation.

INTRODUCTION

Quality assurance is becoming increasingly important for the animal industries, particularly in terms of both food safety and biosecurity.

It is also becoming recognised that animal welfare issues need to be addressed in quality assurance programs.

This is important to acknowledge from both

- a consumer
  
  AND

- an industry perspective
Consumers are becoming more demanding in terms of animal welfare.

This trend is obvious when we look at supermarket activities in Europe in relation to eggs and other products which can only be sold in some supermarkets if part of an accredited scheme that meet prescribed welfare standards.

McDonalds in the USA are also setting animal welfare standards for their suppliers.

Consumers in Australia are also beginning to demand high welfare standards in animal production. To encourage this demand the RSPCA has an accreditation scheme for barn eggs and is developing similar accreditation for other animal industries.

To satisfy the need for more rigorous guidelines a comprehensive welfare audit has been developed specifically for the chicken meat industry.

The welfare audit was developed over a two year period of consultation with a Management Group drawn from many organisations either directly involved in or had an interest in chicken meat, including:

- researchers;
- industry personnel (including both company and farmer representatives); and
- welfare groups and legislators.
The result has been the development of a professional welfare auditing system which consists of 5 booklets containing questionnaires regarding activities for all sectors of the chicken meat industry.

The sectors covered are:

- the hatchery
- broilers
- breeder rearers
- breeder layers
- pick-up, transport and processing

Together, this documentation represents the first comprehensive welfare audit for an animal industry.

A page of audit questions that an auditor would use looks like this:

This page is from the broiler document on routine husbandry procedures during week 1 after placement. It includes questions on checking birds, water and feed as well as questions on the appearance of birds, seeking and following veterinary advice and culling and removing unthrifty birds.

The table at the bottom of the page includes recommendations from the Code of Practice and targets for removal of dead birds. The numbers in the right hand column refer to the section of the document that explains the importance of the questions to welfare and provides information on best practice.
There are 3 types of questions:

Those considered critical to welfare – Critical questions are defined as those where “if something goes wrong the birds are irrevocably damaged”.

Those reflecting “good farming practice” –

Those indicating difficult to verify questions –

All questions that relate to the Code of Practice are identified with a symbol

The minimum to pass an audit is evidence of compliance with all the critical questions and the good farming practice questions that relate to the Code of Practice.

On this page the grower would need to be able to provide some evidence of complying with some specific questions relating to routine husbandry procedures for growers in week 1 after placement include:

Two critical questions are checking the birds at least 4 times daily and identifying whether bird behaviour appears normal and the birds look healthy. While this question on bird behaviour involves some interpretation, a good stockperson uses bird behaviour to tell him or her that the birds are normal. If an audit was being conducted the auditor would ask the grower these questions and the grower would show the auditor the records. The records could be check-sheet or diary entries.
Another critical question is on culling unthrifty birds. This is considered critical to welfare as it is particularly important that unhealthy birds are identified and killed as soon as possible. The normal batch card that shows the number of birds culled each day would provide evidence for the auditor.

A related good practice question is disposing of dead birds according to company recommendations.

This is considered good practice as removal of dead and culled birds from the shed and their proper disposal are an important health issue to prevent the build up of pathogenic micro-organisms and the transmission of disease to healthy birds. Number of dead birds recorded daily on the batch card, the lack of a build-up of dead birds in the shed and an examination of the disposal facility would provide evidence for the auditor.

This question has an asterisk against it which means there is a footnote at the bottom of the page. In relation to disposal of dead birds, the Code of Practice has no information and the document provides information on targets which are to freeze and take off farm, compost or bury in covered sites.

An example of a question that is difficult to verify is in the section on bird arrival and placement on placing birds gently. It is obviously important to bird welfare to be careful with the birds, but unless an auditor is there at placement, it is something that is difficult to verify.

Because the questions are based around the tasks routinely performed by people across all sectors of the industry, this makes the questions relatively straightforward to comply with.
As well as the audit questions each booklet contains training information on both best practice and the importance of each audit question or series of questions to welfare. There are also examples of record sheets and checklists, which can be tailored for individual companies.

Each booklet has several pages relating to different activities such as shed set-up, placement of birds, routine husbandry procedures, equipment and housing and staff. There are also sections in relevant booklets on pick-up, transport and processing.

BENEFITS OF THE PROFESSIONAL BROILER AUDIT

By applying this audit, the community can be reassured about standards of welfare and the demonstrated industry commitment to welfare through identifying and monitoring animal, equipment and staff resourcing problems associated with quality animal care.

Animal welfare issues are a potential industry-wide risk both within an industry and across industries i.e. bad press or practices in one industry can not only impact on that industry but have an effect on other industries. For example, most consumers don’t distinguish between chicken meat and laying egg production. There is also the more recent and ongoing issue of using animal welfare as a trade barrier.
As well as demonstrating an industry commitment to animal welfare, the audit will also lead to a continual improvement in animal welfare as it requires close attention to detail and also includes considerable training material. Most importantly, the audit has the potential to change industry and community attitudes from one of "being seen to be complying with minimum standards in the Code of Practice" to one of "complying or striving to achieve best practice in relation to welfare".

At the industry level there should also be fewer crises as the process itself can help defuse potential threats by having documented evidence of current industry practices, which from a welfare perspective are often of a higher standard than the Code of Practice.

There may be a number of intangible benefits such as better production and maintenance of equipment because of the attention to detail that is required and consequently fewer crises at the level of the farm.

Because of all of these, it should also help to improve, or at least maintain, industry sustainability particularly because of the links between production and welfare.
In relation to improvements in production, a recent evaluation at broiler farms showed reduced mortality in week 1 after placement.

Growers that implemented the audit recorded losses of 1.37% while the Control group was found to have significantly greater losses at 1.74%.

While the overall mortalities for the growing period were not different, it is interesting to speculate that the audit treatment resulted in a lower mortality in week 1 because of the closer attention to detail that is part of the adoption process.

Growers adopting this audit procedure also reported that because of the daily-task oriented nature of the questions, it was not difficult to incorporate the additional records and checklists into their daily routine.

It is important to clarify what the process is NOT intended to achieve:

It is NOT intended to change current industry practices, but aims to identify and encourage adoption of best practice.

It is NOT intended to resolve controversial issues, although it has identified-areas that require further examination and has also identified areas in the Code of Practice that need to be improved or resolved.
This exciting new program represents the first comprehensive welfare audit for any animal industry and will benefit the industry through improved image, welfare and productivity. We are currently working with some companies to implement the welfare audit prior to extending it to the whole industry. One challenge that remains is to incorporate all industry audit programs, such as food safety, biosecurity and welfare into a single Quality Assurance program.

For further information, contact John Barnett, Animal Welfare Centre, Victorian Institute of Animal Science, 600 Sneydes Road, Werribee, 3030. (email john.barnett@nre.vic.gov.au).
7.2 Appendix 2: Media release

- The welfare of Victoria’s chickens will be improved under a world-leading audit announced today.
- The first comprehensive animal welfare audit has been developed for our chickens from hatchery to processing plant.
- The audit was launched today by Agriculture Minister, Mr Keith Hamilton, at the Department of Natural Resources and Environment’s Victorian Institute of Animal Science, at Attwood.
- Chicken meat industry representatives, welfare groups and researchers have helped develop the audit, which is based on good farming practices in the industry.
- Mr Hamilton said this was the beginning of animal industry welfare audits.
- “It provides an example of future practices when all animal industries will have agreed documentation on animal welfare that can both be audited and made available for public scrutiny,” Mr Hamilton said.
- He commended the chicken meat industry’s commitment to animal welfare, particularly for discussing industry practice with welfare groups and opening up industry facilities for inspection.
- Audit documentation has been prepared for the complete chicken meat industry – hatchery, broiler, breeder rearer, breeder layer and pick-up, transport and processing.
- The audit was developed by research staff in NRE, the University of Melbourne (UofM) and the South Australian Research and Development Institute under the auspices of the Animal Welfare Centre (a joint centre of NRE, UofM and Monash University) in collaboration with representatives from industry and welfare groups.
- Mr Hamilton called on other animal industries to use the model developed for the chicken meat audit so that industry and welfare groups can reach agreement on welfare standards. NRE's role is to broker these interactions.
- Mr Hamilton also urged the national chicken meat industry to implement the welfare audit.

(Contact details were provided)
7.3 Appendix 3: Article for Industry Journals: Welfare Audit for the Chicken Meat Industry

The Hon Keith Hamilton, MP and the Victorian Minister for Agriculture, officially launched ‘a welfare audit for the chicken meat industry’ at the Department of Natural Resources and Environment’s Victorian Institute of Animal Science, Attwood, on 23rd October.

For the last 2½ years a collaborative project has been underway to develop a comprehensive welfare audit for the chicken meat industry. This is a landmark project in that it provides the world’s first comprehensive animal welfare audit for an entire industry – in this case for the chicken meat industry from the hatchery to the processing plant. It provides an agreed set of questions for an auditor to use that have been developed in conjunction with inputs from a number of stakeholders and are based on good farming practices in the industry.

Currently, the only welfare requirements for industries to abide by are ‘codes of practice’ for individual industries. These ‘codes’ are developed by SCARM (Standing Committee on Agriculture and Resource Management) and agreed to for national adoption by ARMCANZ (Agriculture and Resource Management Council of Australia and New Zealand). Such national codes are either adopted without change or there may be some minor modifications by individual States and Territories to meet local requirements. A perceived negative aspect of codes of practice is that they are seen as generally reflecting only minimum welfare standards. One benefit of the welfare audit is that, in time, it will assist in changing the perception of an industry that is seen as only complying with minimum welfare standards to one of an industry striving to achieve high welfare standards.

In the last few years many of the animal industries have either developed or have been working towards Quality Assurance schemes either within companies or within industries. Such schemes have been to particularly provide reassurance over the safety and quality of animal products for retailers and consumers. However, once a QA framework is in place, it is easy to add value to it by incorporating other areas of concern, be it biosecurity, environment and waste management or animal welfare. Overseas, there has also been some attention to animal welfare standards with the result that some retailers have set their own standards for their suppliers. Thus, in Europe there are a number of ‘welfare schemes’ with differing standards. Similarly, there have been recent developments in the US with fast-food outlets setting standards for their suppliers. For example, both McDonald’s and Burger King have set standards for space allowance of laying hens in cages (these space allowances are similar to the standard that has been operational in Australia since 1995), although one company’s standard provides 2 square inches more space per bird. These schemes often have a focus on consumer perceptions and marketing rather than animal welfare, although at times they may coincide. The ‘welfare audit’ project places the focus on animal welfare, not consumer perceptions, and also provides a framework for a single national welfare audit for the industry.

The chicken meat industry in Australia saw a need to develop uniform standards for animal welfare and such an objective appeared in the 5-year plan of the research corporation (Rural Industries Research and Development Corporation {RIRDC}) used by the chicken meat industry for R&D in 1998. This was the start of a collaborative project to develop a comprehensive welfare audit in which industry has been a proactive partner. This was an ideal industry in which to attempt such a project as the companies control all aspects of production and thus the situation in other industries of lack of control beyond the farm gate was not an issue. The collaborative project was developed by research staff in the Department of Natural Resources and Environment (NRE), the University of Melbourne (UoM) and the South Australian Research and Development Institute (SARDI) and was conducted under the auspices of the Animal Welfare Centre (a joint centre of NRE, UoM and Monash University), with funding from the partner organisations and RIRDC. The project was completed with the assistance of a Management Group with representatives from industry, the welfare lobby, legislators and research and teaching staff from NRE, UoM and SARDI.
Documentation has been prepared in separate booklets for the hatchery, broiler, breeder rearer, breeder layer and pick-up, transport and processing sectors of the chicken meat industry. Drafts were circulated for comment to all chicken meat companies and revised documents have been provided to companies as both hard copies and on a CD. Each booklet is comprised of audit questions, background information on the purpose of the questions and how the questions/practices relate to welfare and the Codes of Practice for welfare for both the transport and keeping of poultry. Examples of recording sheets are also included to assist farmers/unit managers demonstrate compliance with the audit process. The audit questions include both critical questions, which are defined as those where “if something goes wrong the welfare of the birds is irrevocably damaged” and good practice questions which reflect the current state of knowledge and its practical implementation in the industry. For a number of areas there are ‘targets’ for farmers/unit managers to aim for, based on current industry information on good farming practice, or that act as a trigger for attention. The audit questions have been based around daily (or less frequent) management tasks that are routinely conducted, which makes the whole process easy to follow. As such, welfare is integrated into routine farm and animal management and is not considered as a separate task. The purpose of the audit documentation is threefold: Firstly, to provide documented evidence of high quality animal care; secondly, to identify and monitor equipment and animal problems associated with quality animal care; and thirdly to identify and monitor human resource issues associated with quality animal care. It was not the purpose of the audit either to require change to current industry practice or to resolve controversial issues, rather it was to identify and encourage best practice for each sector of the industry.

While it was not possible to evaluate all sectors of the audit, there was some evaluation of all booklets ‘on-farm’ to provide feedback on the validity of the questions and any perceived difficulties in implementing the audit. Also, there was a more comprehensive evaluation of the broiler audit. 24 broiler farms contracted to one company were used. The company provided production data for the last 3 batches of birds and the farms were ranked from 1-24 according to their performance. Pairs of farms with similar performance were allocated to treatment and control groups. The 12 treatment farms received the audit document and were asked to complete the recording sheets. The 12 control farms did not receive a copy of the audit document and were asked to continue recording what they normally would have done such as mortalities, culls, feed supplied and body weight. Growers participated in the study for 3 batches of birds. At the end of the third batch, the audit was conducted for the period from 2-5 weeks of age; this time period was chosen to avoid variation due to pick-up schedules. As expected, record-keeping was better at the treatment farms and there was also a significantly lower mortality (1.37 vs. 1.74 %) in the first week after placement. There was a similar trend for mortalities during the entire production period (5.05 vs 5.35 %), although this difference was not statistically different.

Some of the feedback was the documents were considered to be 'large', nevertheless the participants at the treatment farms soon found that the tasks were not onerous, particularly because the questions (and hence the records) were routine-task oriented. The feedback received from farmers has resulted in a simplification of the recording sheets. Nevertheless, it is anticipated that the recording sheets will only be used as examples and it is likely the broiler companies will modify their own batch cards and perhaps include additional recording sheets for farmers to demonstrate compliance.

While a reduced mortality can be considered a welfare benefit, and some production advantage may be expected from implementing the welfare audit, because of the close link between welfare and production, any production advantage should be considered as just a bonus from implementing the welfare audit. A welfare audit is seen as having a number of advantages. These are:

- An immediate improvement in animal welfare.
- Public reassurance of high welfare standards.
- Market protection and development by having systems in place to minimise industry-wide risks.
- A mechanism for recommending upgrades to welfare Codes of Practice.
• Generally higher standards of animal welfare than the minimum standards currently in the Codes of Practice.
• Demonstrated industry commitment to welfare.
• Continual improvement in animal welfare.
• Certainty for all.
• Intangible benefits including improved production, better maintenance of equipment, fewer crises and staff training.
• Less focus on industries with QA by Government, welfare groups and the public.
• Improved relationships between industry and welfare groups and the potential to reduce conflict between industry, government and welfare groups.
• Improved industry sustainability.

To realise all of the above benefits requires an adoption by industry of the welfare audit. At the least it needs to be adopted by individual companies who will act as standard-setters for the industry and at best it should be adopted nationally with annual reporting of uptake and production statistics to show improvements over time. There is also a need to encourage retailers to play a continuing role in meeting community expectations and have chicken meat companies taking such initiatives as adoption of the welfare audit as preferred or sole suppliers. There is also recognition that the community lacks an understanding of modern farming, including its advantages and disadvantages. Thus, while adoption of this welfare audit will go a long way in satisfying Governments and some animal welfare lobby groups on the welfare standards in the industry, there is a need for public education on issues of animal production, including industry efforts in developing and implementing projects such as this one. Two recommendations arising from this project will be firstly to hold an industry workshop to progress adoption of the welfare audit and secondly for both industry and Governments to develop public education programs to increase awareness of animal production issues, including welfare. Without such education programs it is likely that conflicts between the public and farmers will at least continue if not increase. (Contact details for RIRDC and John Barnett were provided).