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Position Statement:

Position Statement on Stunning of Poultry

AAAP Animal Welfare and Management Committee (June 2012)

Approved by AAAP Board of Directors (November 2012)

The humane slaughter of poultry in North America has been the subject of considerable research and discussion. To this end, the American Association of Avian Pathologists (AAAP) and the American College of Poultry Veterinarians (ACPV) have created this position statement which summarizes the understanding and application of the poultry stunning technologies that are in existence today.

In North America, most commercial poultry slaughter facilities render birds unconscious (stunning) prior to slaughter through the use of low voltage electrical current or controlled atmosphere stunning (CAS). Low voltage electrical stunning remains the North American poultry industry standard. Electroencephalogram and physical examination confirm that low voltage causes instant loss of consciousness, often at rates exceeding 99.5 percent efficiency. Improper application of electrical stunning procedures is avoidable and can cause pre-stun electrical shock or incomplete stunning.

There are large differences between the low voltage electrical stunning systems used in North America and the high voltage systems used in European slaughter plants. European processors are inclined to consider CAS systems in order to avoid the tissue damage associated with high voltage systems.

Controlled atmosphere stunning (CAS) systems rapidly induce unconsciousness by replacing normal air with mixtures of carbon dioxide, nitrogen, or argon gas or by exposing birds to reduced atmospheric pressure in a controlled manner. CAS systems have been demonstrated to be effective for the stunning of commercial poultry, but the overall effect on animal welfare when compared to well managed electrical stunning systems has not been determined. Improper application of controlled atmosphere systems on poultry can be associated with excitation and injury prior to loss of consciousness and/or incomplete stunning. CAS systems offer ergonomic benefits for processing plant employees involved in placing extremely large poultry in shackles and therefore may also positively affect welfare and product quality when utilized correctly.

Research has not consistently demonstrated one commercially available stunning method to be superior to another. Based on current research and evidence available from North American slaughter facilities, it is the position of the AAAP and the ACPV that low voltage and CAS are humane and acceptable methods for stunning of poultry. We recommend additional research on stunning physiology and methods to improve and refine stunning procedures in commercial poultry.

A list of key publications regarding these topics may be obtained through AAAP at www.aaap.info.