

Development of a Welfare Quality® based protocol for assessing the welfare of broiler chickens during transport to slaughter plants

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Transport to slaughter plants is a critical phase of the meat production process, which could affect the industry's image. In broilers, heat stress, metabolic disorders and injuries could be intensified by transport, which has economic implications. However, no protocol exists for the evaluation of welfare during transport. Valid evaluation methods are important for welfare improvements. The aim is to develop a broiler welfare assessment protocol for transport, and to condense it to a simplified version in order to facilitate uptake by the industry or authorities.

The reference protocol contains mostly animal-based measures from the Welfare Quality® (2009) protocol, EFSA (2011) report on transport and other literature, conducted before and after catching and slaughter. It is being tested on commercial transports in Belgium and the validity, reliability, and feasibility of the measures will be assessed. Broiler welfare experts will be consulted to aggregate the information from separate measures into an overall welfare score.

The full protocol will be a reference for the condensed version, where we aim for maximal reduction in assessment time and minimal reduction of completeness, by reducing duration or sample size of observations or by removing less essential measures. Results from the application of the full protocol during commercial transports will be used to investigate correlations between measures and the effect of removing certain measures on the overall welfare score. Preference will be given to remove measures that co-vary with other, more feasible, measures or that have a small influence on the overall welfare score.