



Aviagen SweChick Position Statement - Uppdrag Granskning Broadcast

Welfare standards & management change

The images shown in the SVT programme are shocking. We are truly sorry that this has happened on our farms and we are hugely disappointed to have failed the birds in our care.

The euthanasia method shown does not represent Aviagen policies. No bird should suffer in our care and we are appalled by the methods used to euthanise birds.

As a consequence of this, we have taken firm action including a management review of Aviagen SweChick.

Magnus Swalander is now Interim Managing Director of Aviagen SweChick, alongside his responsibility for Global Breed Development for Aviagen Group.

Magnus's number one objective is to work together with the local SweChick team to re-instate best animal husbandry practices in all our Swedish farms. Magnus already sits on the Aviagen Group board, is Swedish and brings with him a high level of experience in commercial and technical aspects of the business as well as specialist knowledge and expertise in the areas of welfare, breed development and higher generation production.

Our first priority is the welfare of our birds and we apologise again for having failed in our duty to uphold this standard in Sweden.

Wider action at Aviagen SweChick

Aviagen SweChick has taken issues highlighted by Uppdrag Granskning and the audits of the Länsstyrelsen County Administrative Board extremely seriously. We have taken and will continue to take actions to resolve any issues highlighted until both Länsstyrelsen and ourselves are satisfied that optimal welfare is achieved as standard on our farms.

As a consequence of these audit reports we have:

- Implemented changes to senior management as referenced above
- Increased education and awareness about animal welfare with our staff in a number of practical training sessions
- Increased the frequency of internal welfare audits to track staff performance
- Reviewed our animal husbandry routines
- Employed a new veterinary expert with an increased focus on welfare
- Ensured that our employees report any welfare irregularities to their manager and also have the option to anonymously report any irregularities within the company
- Been investing in technical solutions to further improve the on farm environment
- Held an additional meeting with Länsstyrelsen and continue holding joint meetings with documented follow-up actions
- Committed to continuing various projects with Svensk Fågel and other poultry producers with Länsstyrelsen

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- Continued to work closely with Svensk Fågel and Länsstyrelsen to clarify welfare policies and regulation
- Implemented the new animal welfare programme from Svensk Fågel for breeders to raise welfare even further
- Participated regularly in Svensk Fågel's annual training programme, which is carried out with the help of the Swedish Board of Agriculture, and is based on the independent audits

This demonstrates our commitment to upholding the highest possible standards of welfare for the birds in our care and that we have responded to resolve any issues that have been highlighted.

A handwritten signature in blue ink, consisting of several loops and a central scribble.

Patrick Claeys
President European Operations
Aviagen



Aviagen SweChick Q&A – Feed Control and Conventional vs Slower Growing Production

Feed control

Q. Why do the birds in the film have very little feathers?

Any domestic poultry will lose feathers in the mating and production period and will regain feather cover in case they re-enter a second production cycle (this is called the moulting process). The degree of feather loss will vary from one bird to another. This process is the same for both conventional and slower-growing breeds.

Q: Why do you restrict the feed for the birds?

All types of domesticated animals including dogs, cats, cattle, pigs and chickens require an optimal weight to maintain good health, and controlled feeding is used for all these species. Farmers control the feed provided to chickens in order to ensure optimal health and fitness which prepares the breeding birds to reproduce. It is important to recognise that controlled feeding means that the birds always continue to grow throughout their life; controlled feeding means that the birds maintain the right conditions and do not get too fat or too skinny.

Q: What is the breeding paradox

The breeding paradox is a challenge for both poultry producers and breeders.

Animal husbandry (as above)

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Breeding

Primary poultry breeders ensure a balanced approach to breeding which delivers continuous improvement in the health and welfare of birds while simultaneously improving environmental sustainability. Breeding poultry is quite complex as it involves taking into account relationships between different characteristics, which may not have favourable relationships. For example, meat bird performance and breeder performance, where a bird with genes for very good meat bird performance may not be predisposed to lay large number of eggs. But by keeping large populations of birds, and careful selection using the right technology, you can make progress in both characteristics. Similar approaches are taken for health and welfare characteristics for example.



Q. Why do we see aggressive feather pecking in the birds and is this linked to low lighting in the sheds?

Lighting is very important when it comes to breeding birds. The level of lighting should replicate a bird's normal daily routine and should follow recommended guidelines to get the same spectrum of light as the sun if natural daylight is not already provided by windows. Aviagen SweChick farms have daylight spectrum lamps which complies with the required regulations.

Q. What do you have to say about your own vet's comments on your starving birds?

Comments made were misplaced and incorrect. The veterinarian in question has now left Aviagen SweChick and we have employed a new veterinary expert with an increased focus on welfare.

Q. But is it true that birds are fighting to be fed often resulting in cannibalism?

For any animal, feeding should be controlled (see other statements). We follow best practice when it comes to feeding the birds to manage them in the best way for the best health, welfare and production.

However the programme clearly shows incidences of cannibalism which is not acceptable and we are working to ensure this does not happen on our farms again.

Q. Why is feed not restricted for slower-growing birds in Norway?

In the programme they are saying the birds are not feed controlled during the production stage. In fact most types of birds including conventional breeds do not require a large amount of feed control during production, however control is done for both slower growing and conventional production during the rearing phase to ensure birds grow in a healthy way and develop lean muscle.

Conventional vs Slower-Growing Breeds

Q. Animal welfare activists have called for a ban on the Ross 308 - what's your response?

We respectfully disagree with that position, and feel that any such discussion tends to be based on outdated information and disregard of how modern poultry breeding works.

Modern poultry breeding, including the development of the Ross 308 breed, is the result of careful and balanced breeding programs with decades of progress.

The Ross 308 breed has been selected and refined to provide clear advantages in several critical areas, a key focus being on health and welfare. These advantages also extend to sustainability, and economic viability. We believe that the Ross 308 breed, in line with modern breeding practices, offers a balanced approach to poultry farming that addresses both the needs of the birds and the demands of the industry.

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Q. But do slower-growing breeds have higher welfare than conventional breeds?

As a breeding company, we offer our customers choice. We produce both conventional and slower growing chickens and it is important to realise that all our chickens are selected for health and welfare characteristics.

The Ross 308 is selected with a high focus of welfare in mind. The reason why the Ross 308 is so successful in Europe is because it has much better health and welfare compared to any conventional chicken we compete with, especially in terms of good leg health and high liveability in the meat chickens. It is also the best for environmental and economic sustainability. This is the reason why the Ross 308 is nowadays the leading breed in Sweden.

It is also important to realise that slow-growing breeds come at a cost:

- Farming efficiency and productivity is significantly reduced and this has a large negative impact on cost of production and economic sustainability of the poultry sector, thus resulting in increased cost of valuable, healthy protein for the consumer, making it more difficult for families that are less economically strong to put food on the table.
- In addition, slow growing production comes with decreased environmental sustainability and reduces decades of environmental benefits the poultry sector has made to date.
 - Sweden's self-sufficiency would be at great risk; this would move from a current self-sufficiency level of 73% to circa 40%. The difference (60%) will then be covered by imported chicken meat from countries that have significantly lower welfare standards. This would be a very poor situation for safety of meat supply; it would result in many farmers discontinuing production, and importantly would not result in an overall realised improvement in welfare.
 - Europe's self-sufficiency would be at great risk; this would move from a current self-sufficiency level of 113% to circa 63%. The difference (37%) will then be covered by imported chicken meat from countries that have significantly lower welfare standards. This would be a very poor situation for safety of meat supply; it would result in many farmers discontinuing production, and importantly would not result in an overall realised improvement in welfare.

Q. What are the benefits of slower growing vs fast growing breeds of poultry?

We as a breeding company just want to provide what the different markets want, that is our objective. We produce both conventional and slower growing chickens and it's important to realise that all our chickens are selected for health and welfare characteristics, as good welfare brings advantages both to the birds themselves and for the producers. It is simply good business.

It is proven that slow growing breeds come at a cost to both farming efficiency and productivity, which has a large impact on cost of production. It is by no means 'bad' to encourage slower grown poultry meat production – that option is available. The problem is that the sector cannot produce this product without an increased environmental cost, and an increased financial cost for the consumer, which risks socio economic division where low-income families will struggle to afford healthy chicken protein.



Any nation seeking to increase the proportion of slower growing poultry must accept the risk that cheaper, imported poultry will reach its market to fill gaps in demand for affordable price chicken. These imports will come from countries with substantially lower welfare standards and could undo all the ongoing efforts of the Swedish poultry sector to protect and enhance the welfare of birds in its care.

Q. Do slow growing breeds have higher welfare than conventional breeds?

There can be differences in particular characteristics but the important thing to note is that the bird management factors have a very large impact on realised bird welfare. For example, in the “Greenwell” study conducted by Wageningen University (<https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0032579122002255>), they found significant overlap in real welfare between the growing schemes using conventional and slower growing breeds.

The Ross 308 is selected with a high focus of welfare in mind. The reason why the Ross 308 is so successful in Europe is because it is the best for environmental sustainability, and importantly has much better health and welfare compared to any conventional chicken we compete with, especially in terms of good leg health and high liveability in the meat chickens.

Q. What are Aviagen doing to prepare for the European Chicken Commitment (ECC)?

As a breeding company, it is Aviagen’s strategy to develop a diverse range of breeds to offer our customer’s choice in the markets in which they serve. This includes a range of both conventional white feathered chickens and slower-growing colour feathered chickens.

We continue to develop our range of slower-growing breeds and already have a range of options approved for the European Chicken Commitment (ECC) including the Ranger Classic and Ranger Gold breed, the last of which we currently sell into the Scandinavian market. We are also working to have other breeds approved under the ECC scheme to give an even broader offering.

Both our conventional and slower-growing breeds are selected for health and welfare characteristics at the same time as offering excellent breeder and broiler performance.