

Killing day-old chicks? Public opinion regarding potential alternatives

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Abstract

Throughout the world, male chicks from layer breeds are killed just after hatching, as they are not profitable as regards the production of meat. The Dutch and European parliaments have insisted on research into possible alternatives to the killing of day-old chicks. In the present study we have investigated Dutch public opinion on the acceptability of these alternatives by means of discussions in so-called focus groups and via a public survey through computer-aided personal interviews (CAPI). To inform the participants about the subject, a film was made to explain the current practice and introduce a number of technological alternatives that would prevent development of male embryos, as well as the possibility of creating a 'dual-purpose chicken' that would allow male chicks to be used for meat production. The topics addressed in the study included the willingness of participants to pay a premium for eggs and chicken meat, were it necessary to prevent killing of male chicks. Focus-group discussions showed that many participants were unaware of the current practise of killing male chicks, and were shocked by this practice. However, once informed, the participants seemed able to take various considerations into account and rank the alternatives. The alternatives 'looking into the fresh egg (to determine sex of the egg and not incubate male eggs)', and 'dual-purpose chickens' scored best out of all the possible alternatives, and higher than maintaining the current practice. 'Influencing the laying hens such that they produce fewer male eggs' scored the same as maintaining the current practice. The use of 'genetic modification to facilitate looking into the fresh egg' scored only slightly lower than maintaining the current practice. Alternatives whereby developing male embryos die, or are killed, scored lower than maintaining the current practice.

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