The welfare of ducks during foie gras production

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Abstract

This review, which focuses on foie gras production from ducks in France, highlights welfare problems that may arise in the final (third) stage of production, when force-feeding occurs and which lasts 12 to 15 days. Welfare problems arising in the first two stages are also considered. The male mulard duck, a non-migratory hybrid between a muscovy drake (Cairina moschata) and a female domestic duck (Anas platyrhynchos), is used most frequently despite being fearful, nervous and maladapted to force-feeding conditions. During the period of force-feeding, mortality is 2 to 6%, higher than in fattening units for meat production. Welfare deteriorates markedly as ducks progress through the three production stages. Posture and gait abnormalities and wing lesions develop, and contact dermatitis is widespread and often severe. Oesophagitis and other injuries are documented. Steatosis and other liver changes are pathological and can limit duck survival. Group housing necessitates the use of crowd-gates to facilitate force-feeding of birds, which show aversive behaviour towards the force-feeder. Cages are small, with a mesh floor without litter or a rest area. Access to open water for bathing or full immersion of the head may be insufficient and make thermoregulation difficult. We conclude that force-feeding causes very poor welfare in ducks and should not be practised. Should foie gras production without force-feeding become possible, duck livers should not reach a weight at which there are pathological effects. Inadequate housing and management conditions should be prevented by establishing limits for the prevalences of contact dermatitis (foot-pad and digits), breast lesions and gait abnormalities, which should not be exceeded prior to slaughter. Limits should also be established for the prevalence of wing and other body lesions after slaughter.

Keywords: animal welfare, control of feeding behaviour, foie gras, force-feeding, liver steatosis, mulard duck

Introduction

With increasing societal concern about animal welfare, a number of farm animal production practices have come under scrutiny. One such practice is the force-feeding of ducks and geese for the production of foie gras (fatty liver or hepatic steatosis). In 1998, the Scientific Committee on Animal Health and Animal Welfare (SCAHAW) reported to the European Commission on the welfare aspects of foie gras production in ducks and geese (SCAHAW 1998). They concluded that “force-feeding is detrimental to the welfare of the birds”. French researchers, who studied several physiological and behavioural measures during force-feeding and did not find supporting scientific evidence, have objected to this conclusion (Guémené & Guy 2004). Examination of duck welfare in foie gras production is timely, as there have been recent public calls for the practice to be banned. In January 2016, the individual caging of ducks for foie gras production in France was replaced by group (collective) housing, with at least three birds per group (Anonymous 2015). This review, which focuses on foie gras production in France, highlights the welfare problems that may arise in the final (third) stage of foie gras production, when force-feeding occurs. Where pertinent, welfare problems that may arise in the first two stages are also described.

We focus on research in ducks rather than geese because ducks are used in over 97% of foie gras production in France (18,600 tons in 2013; Litt & Pé 2015). Most of the foie gras literature is in French. Foie gras-producing countries in the European Union are France, Belgium, Bulgaria, Hungary and Spain (Litt & Pé 2015), producing approximately 90% of the world’s foie gras. Force-feeding of ducks and geese for foie gras is banned in a large number of European and other countries, but many countries where production is banned continue to import it.

The terms force-feeding and gavage are used interchangeably here. Other terms, such as assisted feeding, cramming and over-feeding, are sometimes used in the literature. The main food used, maize, is usually called corn in North America. In some instances approximate translations are used, because the equivalent English word does not seem to exist (eg ‘nervosisme’). The term ‘élevage’ means rearing or breeding but is also used to describe stages of production (eg starter, grower).