



BVA and BVPA response to Defra's consultation on poultry catching and handling

02 May 2025

Introduction

- The British Veterinary Association (BVA) is the national representative body for the veterinary profession in the United Kingdom. With more than 19,000 members, our primary aim is to represent, support and champion the interests of the United Kingdom's veterinary profession. We therefore take a keen interest in all issues affecting the profession, including animal health and welfare, public health, regulatory issues and employment matters.
- 2. BVPA is an association of over 230 poultry veterinarians and scientists working within the poultry industry.
- 3. We welcomed the opportunity to contribute to Defra's consultation on poultry catching and handling.

Q9.a) Should it be legally permissible to catch chickens by two legs for the purpose of loading and unloading for transport?

4. Yes.

Q9.b) If yes, please provide any information you can to support your view:

- 5. We agree with DEFRAs preferred option of clarifying what is legally permissible (double-legged catching) whilst commissioning further research into the welfare implications of alternative catching methods.
- 6. From our experience of general bird handling principles, we believe that doublelegged catching is preferable compared with single-legged catching with regards to bird control and reducing bird movement. A further welfare compromise is the stress generated by the number of birds held per hand which may be more if birds are caught by one leg. On an individual bird basis, avoidance of inversion and supporting the birds by the body provides further welfare benefits e.g. less pressure on joints and would be optimal. If the two-legged hold was to become the standard, the length of time during which the birds are inverted should be minimised as much as is manageable.
- 7. Scientific reviews of catching methods comparing double-leg to single -leg catching suggest that it leads to reduced wing flapping, wing tip injuries, and growth plate fractures (Wessel et al, 2022), However Langkabel et al., 2015 found no difference in lesions between one and two leg catching, and suggest that "cautious handling of animals to reduce stress is more important than "holding animals by both legs". More recent studies, by Kittelsen et al. 2018 and Delanglez et al 2025, found favourable outcomes in terms of injury prevention observed with upright catching methods. However, more research should be done using large sample sizes to assess the associated costs and any unexpected consequences e.g. related to slowing the catch process. It should be noted that the studies are limited and the ones mentioned observed broilers only (juvenile birds).

Delanglez et al 2024 did explore the catching of laying hens, and highlighted welfare benefits of upright catching compare with inverted. Labour conditions, costs and loading times were highlighted as considerations.

8. We are also acutely aware that single-legged catching is predominantly used for



Consultation response



chickens within the industry. We recommend that should single legged catching become explicitly illegal, DEFRA should consult industry on an appropriate time frame for this change. This would aim to avoid a situation where there are catcher labour shortages which would cause welfare challenges itself. We will also highlight that consideration should be paid to how DEFRA/industry ensure that any new legislation is adhered to, and how this would impact UK farmers and their position compared with the European market. There are concerns that the industry in Europe will not shift systems meaning as UK costs increase it may lead to an increase in imports.

- 9. We are also cognisant that the trade off for single-legged catching vs double legged/upright catching is the increased length of time to catch birds and them being loaded on the vehicle. This also impacts welfare of the birds and should be considered.
- 10. BVA/BVPA does not hold data on the prevalence of injuries in the UK industry following single-legged catching, or how this would change for flocks caught via double-leg or body. We would recommend that DEFRA work with industry to review this.
- 11. From an operational perspective, single-leg catching is favoured due to its speed and efficiency. In this method handlers can typically carry multiple birds in each hand, thus expediting the loading process. (Langkabel et al. 2015) It would require appropriate training to ensure that catchers were able to catch with two legs in a way that is safe for them, in the environment that they are catching i.e multi-tier, barn etc. The most effective methods of catching via double legs for each environment should be evaluated.
- 12. Further to the above point, studies (Langkabel et al., 2015 and Wessel et al 2022) have concluded a move to double legged catching has the capacity to improve welfare but will not do so unless the catch is executed according to broad animal welfare standards. For this reason, we believe that catching staff behaviours and training is also paramount to improved welfare outcomes but this should focus on a transition to double-legged catching as a minimum standard. We also believe that how the birds are loaded into the crates is impactful on overall bird injuries.
- 13. While double-leg catching may be more ergonomically demanding for handlers, evidence suggests it results in better direct bird welfare outcomes. Upright catching is the most physically strenuous for workers, as it involves squatting and handling one bird at a time, which can lead to fatigue and slower processing (Langkabel et al., 2015). A review of the occupational risks of any changes to catching legislation would also be valuable.
- 14. To summarise: Double-leg catching, while slightly slower than single-legged catching, and quicker and less labour intensive than upright catching, offers a compromise between efficiency and control. We believe that birds are better supported being grasped by two legs, and with competent and careful handling the number of injuries at time of catch could be reduced. It's noted that an extended period of inversion is not optimal for birds so time spent with birds held by two legs should be kept to a pragmatic minimum. With consideration of the points above we also feel that this is something that is feasible for industry to move towards in the short-medium term.

Q10. Do you or your organisation catch chickens for the purpose of loading and unloading operations?

15. No, please move to Q17





Q17.a) Do you record, or have access to, data on bird welfare outcomes associated with catching? For example, trappings, dead-on-arrival at abattoir, carcase damage (bruising, broken bones, rejections), etc. 16. No

Q18.a) Do you have any comments on the consultation impact assessment and its methodology? For example, has anything been excluded? 17. No

Q19. Do you or your organisation catch turkeys (under 10 kg) for loading and unloading operations?

18. No, please move to Q21

Q21.a) To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statement: 'It should be legally permissible to catch turkeys (under 10 kg) by two legs for the purpose of loading and unloading'? 19. Disagree

Q21.b) Please provide any information you can to support your answer, including any information relating to the welfare of turkeys during, or after, two-leg catching:

20. While similarly to question 9b we, in principle, support double legged catching, we are of the view that catching a bird up to 8 or 10kg is too heavy to catch by the legs alone. We are not aware of how many businesses with turkey operations will be catching in this manner. Turkeys can grow to a much heavier weight than chickens, and have a significantly different body conformation. For a 10 kg turkey, there would be concern over the stress of inversion, and particularly the safe transferral of a bird of this size into upper drawers while maintaining good control of the wings, neck and head to prevent trauma. Legislation should be based on turkey-specific research, and if this is not available, it should be commissioned. Development of clear weight bandings indicating which manual handling methods are permissible at specific weights would be beneficial. For smaller turkeys, double-legged catching should be permissible, but for larger birds greater body support via the leg, body and wing is likely to be required.