

## The Chipping of Spent Hens

by T.I. Hughes

Every year millions of hens become “spent”. In other, simple words, they are exhausted; they have finished their laying cycle; and, as a result have no economic value. In many parts of Canada they are not even worth the expense of shipping them to a packing plant. As a result, poultry farmers are faced with the unpleasant and difficult task of killing the birds and replacing them with new flock. The alternative, which is not a common practice in Canada, is to force the birds to moult by starving them for a number of days. When the moult is complete the bird will eventually return to laying. To deliberately deprive an animal or bird of food is a criminal offence in Canada which explains why ‘forced moulting’ is not an option for Canadian egg farmers. Which leaves the farmer with only one option; to kill them. But how?

The first challenge is for the farmer to overcome his distaste for the task of killing the birds he or she has been caring for through the egg-laying season. But the bigger challenge is to find a method of killing the birds efficiently, economically and humanely. Remember we are not talking about a handful of birds but, more often, hundreds, even thousands.

First the birds have to be removed physically from their cage, one by one. They then have to be placed in some form of container. Finally they have to be introduced to the equipment which will kill them. And that is the real challenge. How to kill them?

The techniques used in large packing plants are expensive and complicated. They are not an option for a farmer who only kills once a year. This forces the farmer to devise his own method. I am sure the average farmer wants to get this unpleasant task over as quickly as possible. This understandable human reaction results in a method being chosen which allows large numbers of birds to be killed at the same time.

One method is to feed the birds, alive and conscious, into a commercial wood chipper. For anyone who is not familiar with this implement it is a device in which a steel drum is rotated by a gasoline engine. In the chamber, steel rotating hammers hammer the bird which passes on to an area where steel knives cut the birds. The unit reduces the bird to a mass of blood, feathers, flesh and bones. Very effective and probably quick. But is the method humane?

Obviously some of the birds will die very quickly but not before they have suffered the trauma of being picked up and dropped into the feeder. And some of the birds may take longer to die than others. How long? Nobody can say with any degree of certainty. Euthanasia or ‘mercy killing’ requires that the animal be rendered unconscious before any procedure occurs such as hoisting, bleeding, pelting. Obviously any method of slaughtering to be truly ‘merciful’ must also protect the animal against the fear and stress associated with the preparation for, and presentation to, the point of ‘no return’. The ‘wood chipper’ fails to be considered as a ‘humane slaughtering’ device on all counts.

Any method of killing animals must not desensitize the operator. A ‘desensitized’ operator will, sooner or later, become callous and indifferent to the welfare of the animal they are killing.

And, surely, any method of killing animals must be accepted by the public as humane. Can anyone believe that the public would accept dogs, cats, puppies and kittens being fed alive, conscious and kicking into a wood chipper? The very thought appalls. But if not companion animals, why hens or any other creature?

The Canadian Farm Animal Care Trust believes this method of killing birds is inhumane

and unacceptable. We are appealing to the humane movement and Canadian Veterinary Medical Association to join CanFACT in condemning this method and urging the Government of Canada to prohibit by law, the use of wood chippers to kill birds, or any animal.