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November 4, 2009

Docket No. AMS-TM-09-0060
Ms. Valerie Frances, Executive Director
Room 4004—So. Ag Stop 0268
1400 Independence Avenue, SW
Washington, DC 20250-0268

Re: Docket No. AMS-TM-09-0060; TM-05-14—National Organic Standards Board,
Livestock Committee, Animal Welfare Recommendations

Dear Ms Frances:

My name is Dr. James T. Barton. I am a board certified poultry veterinarian with 19 years of experience working in commercial poultry farming, veterinary diagnostic work, scientific investigation, and teaching.

I am also a certified animal welfare auditor and immediate past president of PAACO, the Professional Animal Auditor Certification Organization. PAACO, through its work training animal welfare auditors, certifying auditors, and certifying animal welfare audits, has become the recognized authority in quality animal welfare auditing practices. I conduct approximately 20 animal welfare audits per year, and I provide veterinary consulting services to conventional and organic poultry farming operations.

I am also an AVMA member, as well as a member of the American Association of Avian Pathologist (AAAP). I have the privilege of serving on the AAAP Welfare Committee.

I have hands-on experience developing and evaluating antibiotic alternatives for use in poultry and I am convinced it is feasible to raise poultry without the routine use of antibiotics or synthetic chemicals.

I think one part of my background is particularly relevant to this committee. My family raised vegetables on a small “truck farm” in Northwest Arkansas for much of my childhood and early adulthood. In fact, my veterinary school tuition, fees, and living expenses were paid through the “scholarship” provided by the hard work of my family raising corn, tomatoes, cantaloupe, watermelons, blackberries, and other crops. I have been involved in small farming since my early childhood and spent countless mornings at the Fayetteville Arkansas Farmers’ Market selling locally-produced vegetables.



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Today, I am here at the request of the AAAP through my role on their Welfare Committee. The AAAP appreciates the opportunity to comment on Docket No. AMS-TM-09-0060, via which the Livestock Committee indicated its intent to develop more specific standards to improve animal welfare under organic management. Our comments in this response address welfare needs associated with the organic management of poultry raised for food production.

General Comment

A review of the proposed welfare recommendations suggests many of these recommendations are intended to address behavioral concerns. This is commendable; however, some of these changes will have the unintended effect of impairing physiologic needs that outweigh the potential improvements in behavior. We believe organic farmers want to protect the physical health and welfare of the animals under their care.

When looking at how different housing systems protect the welfare of animals, it is important to consider all the factors contributing to the animals' welfare.

The proposed recommendations contain criteria that are not directly related to "organic" requirements and will significantly negatively impact the welfare of animals in these systems. The new rules, if implemented will make organic poultry farming uneconomical and will also adversely affect the welfare and health of the chicken and turkeys.

§205.238 Livestock health care practice standard. (a) (6)

Beak Trimming:

Although there are alternative methods for preventing flock behavior issues, such as persecution and cannibalism, many of these methods are not yet available (genetic selection), may not be consistent with the intent of organic farming (use of synthetic methionine treatment), or require high capital investment (specific housing for low intensity lighting). Until alternatives are fully available to farmers, beak trimming and other procedures designed to prevent injuries must be allowed.

Beak trimming was developed not for aesthetic reason but for better welfare and lower mortality in chicken. Chickens peck to establish their social order/dominance. Farmers trim the birds' sharp beaks to prevent unnecessary injuries and to prevent the vice of cannibalism (the chicken are attracted to the injury/blood which stimulates them to peck more). The incidence of pecking, cannibalism and vent injury is higher in cage free flocks compared to flocks in cages. (Cannibalism is the number 1 problem now in cage-free farming, even with beak trimming allowed!) So, prohibiting beak trimming is counterproductive to the purpose of providing better welfare, less injury and mortality to



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the flock. It is arbitrary to prohibit beak trimming, if dehorning, pig teeth trimming and sheep tail docking are allowed under the organic standards?

The draft recommendations "lump" all avian species into one category and the proposal to prohibit beak-trimming and toe-trimming across all categories of poultry are in error. The board should consider amending the proposed rules to prohibit the beak and toe trimming in broilers intended for a short growing period (less than 8 weeks). However, for animals intended for longer term production (older broilers or roasters >8 weeks, turkeys, breeding flocks and egg-production flocks), beak trimming should be specifically permitted to control feather pecking and cannibalism. Additionally, for male poultry being raised for breeding purposes, trimming of the rear toe on each foot should be allowed to prevent injury to the female during multiple mating acts common in poultry. Only trained personnel should perform beak and toe trimming using proper equipment and procedures that minimize pain, prevent excessive bleeding, promote rapid healing and prevent infection.

§205.239 (a)(2)(i)

Housing Requirements

The space requirements for poultry should reflect science-based needs of the birds or minimally be consistent with guidelines of existing, auditable standards. The space requirement for laying hens at 6 birds/12 sq. ft. indoor and 4 birds/12 sq. ft. outdoor is arbitrary and not based on science or actual welfare metrics. The requirements for turkeys at 22 sq. ft. per bird indoor space plus 80 sq. feet per bird of outdoor space (1.8 acres per 1000 birds) are similarly unsubstantiated relative to physiologic or behavioral characteristics. Also, the indoor stocking density for broiler chicken is 10 birds/12 sq. ft. If this density is acceptable for a 5 lbs. broiler chicken, it should be allowed for a 4 lbs. layer chicken?

Lower flock density is not always directly related to better welfare for the flock. In many northern regions of the United States, hen body heat is important to keep the houses warm in the winter and reduce the amount of fossil fuel energy needed to maintain bird comfort. If economic conditions prevent farmers from purchasing fuel the chickens may huddle together during winter. This will lead to more cases of mortality due to birds piling up on each other. Another negative impact would be poor chicken house ventilation since farmers will limit the introduction of fresh air as they conserve the heat produce by the chicken. Finally, lower chicken house temperatures will lead to increased feed consumption. (Animals burn calories to make body heat). Increased feed costs will cause decreased profitability for farmers who are already having a difficult time paying their feed bills.



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It is inappropriate to generically state a space allotment without taking into account other housing and environmental effects. With broilers, farmers use a body weight ratio to determine the correct density (lbs/sq. ft or kg/m²). For laying hens (light and heavy breeds), there are density recommendations to optimize nest availability, feeder and water space as well as floor space.

Alternative housing includes aviary systems with wire flooring and perches above manure belts. These hens have access to the floor of the building and can scratch in the litter. Perches and wire flooring above the manure belts allow daily removal of manure resulting in a clean environment and fresh air with minimal ammonia present even in the dead of winter. It seems counter-productive to hen welfare to prohibit the use of such systems, and we do not support this recommendation. Furthermore, raising poultry on wire floors or in cages is conducive to parasite control and fosters the maintenance of health without the use of synthetic drugs. This approach is consistent with organic farming and it seems counterintuitive that it should be prohibited.

(a)(3)(ii)

Required Outdoor Access

Raising poultry indoors has a proven track record of better poultry health, not to mention reducing the potential implications for public health.

The requirement for outdoor access is alarming because it is not conducive to maintaining better flock health and is contrary to the National Organic Program's requirement to "follow practices that minimize the occurrence and spread of diseases and parasites." Exposure to insects and earthworms can facilitate the transfer of internal and external parasites (e.g. roundworms, tapeworms, northern fowl mites), as well as bacterial and viral infections, none of which are conducive to good animal welfare. Such access may necessitate treatment of many flocks for histomoniasis (blackhead). The only FDA-approved medication that is available for control of this condition is Histostat, which is an organic arsenical. It is unlikely that organic arsenicals will be approved for organic flocks.

With this almost certain increase in disease incidence (with the associated negative welfare impact) in organic farms, spillover of disease into large commercial farms in the vicinity is likely. As a poultry veterinary group, the AAAP is particularly concerned about this proposed change.

Here is a specific, real-world example: Turkey farmers in Minnesota used to grow their turkey flocks outside on range. This practice was completely abandoned because wild birds



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regularly infected the turkey flocks with avian influenza. Moving turkey farming indoors resulted in considerably fewer cases of avian influenza, as well as fowl cholera, ectoparasitism, blackhead, predation, and death due to inclement weather.

Finally, there are significant negative economic impacts of access to outdoors for poultry. Shade cloth is typically used to screen outdoor-raised poultry from predators and contact with wild birds (a partial mitigation of biosecurity concerns). This large outdoor access specification would be expensive to cover, thus serving as a barrier for entry to new farmers.

§205.238 Livestock health care practice standard. (b) (1) & (c) (7)
Veterinary Medical Care

The proposed rule changes make mention treating animals with conventional products if the holistic products do not work. This provides the implied façade that ill animals will receive modern treatment and be withdrawn from the organic program. The fact is that a significant number of farmers (perhaps most) regularly withhold treatment or use culling as a treatment to preserve the farm's "organic" status. In the event of an animal illness the organic rule should stipulate that a licensed veterinarian be consulted and therapy appropriate to the condition be implemented and documented. Ideally, long lived animals, such as dairy cows or laying hens could be temporarily removed from organic farming due to an antibiotic treatment, followed by a shortened waiting period to resume organic status for the individual animal or group of animals. Segregating the treated animals could be used to maintain farm organic status.

Organic farming should not imitate animal production practices of more than 50 years ago. The knowledge base of animal welfare and animal health is well developed, and incorporating modern procedures that promote better health and animal welfare is the responsible path for farmers to follow. I don't think people living in houses insulated to 1950's standards are more comfortable than people living in modern condominiums and apartments.

If there is an interest in promoting organic consumption, especially during times of economic trouble, food must be made affordable to the consumer. A survey by IBISWorld found that consumers spend nearly 40% more on organic foods than store brands¹. Adding artificial production hurdles that increase farmers' costs will not make these foods more available to the consumer.

There is a bigger philosophical question that needs to be asked. What is organic? To paraphrase various dictionaries, it denotes foods grown without synthetic fertilizers or



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chemicals. If the Organic Board intends for the new organic definition to denote an old time small family farm utilizing practices from the 1930's, that needs to be spoken.

One other question if these become law for organics: who will be the auditors? How will these practices that be monitored, especially the provision for humane veterinary treatment of ill animals? There is too much potential for abuse and mistreatment of animals with the rules set up like these.

The AAAP, and I, appreciate the opportunity to present these comments to the committee.

Thank you,

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ⁱ IBISWorld Investigates The Supermarket Industry and Consumer Spending
<http://www.ibisworld.com/pressrelease/pressrelease.aspx?prid=183>