The expanding market for slow-growing broilers

Slow-growing Label Rouge broilers are entrenched in France, and the UK’s welfare-approved flocks are gaining market share, but the Netherlands’ slower-growing chickens dominate the fresh retail market.

BY GARY THORNTON

Slow-growing broilers will hold 90 percent of the fresh retail market for chicken in the Netherlands by the end of 2016, and the switch from conventional broilers to slower-growing chickens has been dramatic and swift — occurring in less than three years.

Speaking at the 2016 National Chicken Council Chicken Marketing Summit, Claude Toudic, technical manager, Hubbard France, said that by 2020 all chicken meat sold in retail grocery stores in the Netherlands will be from slower-growing production schemes.

Already in 2016, between 25 percent and 30 percent of all Dutch broiler production is in slower-growing breeds and regimens, he said. The total share is offset to some degree by the fact that a large portion of the country’s broiler production is exported. The Netherlands is almost 200 percent self-sufficient for broiler meat.

Market segments for slow-growing chicken

With the Dutch market’s switch from conventional broilers on fresh shelves for both dressed carcasses and cut-up chicken parts — and a lack of interest for the free range concept — Toudic said the market is now split in three segments:

Better Life 1-Star broiler flock has lower stocking density for Hubbard JA757 broilers with access to ‘winter garden’ through pop-holes, at right.

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Chicken of Tomorrow (COT) and New Standard Chicken (New STD) — 70 percent retail share — were introduced in 2013 and 2014 by retailers and the chicken industry in response to public pressure about fast-growing conventional broilers. Limits on average daily weight gains (ADG) are 50 grams for COT and 45 grams for New STD and other similarly less stringent standards than for alternative slow-growing production programs (see table, “Conventional vs. slow-growing broiler production standards, Netherlands”).

Better Life 1-Star, introduced in 2007, has 20 percent retail share. A 56-day indoor growing program with a maximum 42 gram per day ADG provides natural light for birds and “pop holes” for access to 20 percent to 25 percent additional floor space in “winter garden” or “porch.”

Organic chicken meets EU and SKAL (organic control authority) requirements including access to fresh air and outdoor space (minimum 4 square meters run space) and organic feed (consisting of at least 20
percent grown at the farm or in the region from non-GMO grains).

**Price ranges for chicken breast meat**

Compared to breast fillets from conventional chickens, COT fillets are about EUR2 (USD2.2) per kg more expensive and Better Life 1-Star fillets are EUR2 per kg more expensive than COT, said Toudic.

The Chicken of Tomorrow and Better Life 1-Star chicken, nonethe-

less, are competitive with pork meat, he said. Organic chicken, on the other hand, is more than three times more expensive than conventional chicken.

**Plofkip chicken changed production**

What led the Dutch poultry industry to such dramatic, rapid adoption of slow-growing broil-

A range of production schemes are used for slow-growing broiler flocks in the Netherlands.

The UK market is sensitive to both animal welfare and price concerns. The long-term trend is for increased shares for slower growing breeds.
ers? While consumers and activists in the Netherlands have had a long-standing concern with animal welfare, it was the plofkip chicken that triggered the takeover by slower-growing production schemes.

Plofkip in the Dutch language means exploding chicken. As Toudic explained, this was the central image of an advertising campaign conducted by the animal welfare activist group Wakker Dier (Awake Animal) in 2012.

The ad campaign played on consumer concerns about animal welfare with imagery of fast-growing (exploding) chickens. Comparing an organic chicken of 930 grams to a conventional broiler of 2,350 grams, the campaign portrayed the conventional broilers as barely able to walk and asked consumers to stop buying plofkip chickens and instead buy slower-growing broilers.

“The campaign has been extremely successful,” Toudic said.

“The communication has been focusing on restoring the link between what people eat and how chickens are living. The word Plofkip [exploding chicken] has nearly 100 percent name recognition in the Netherlands and was chosen the most famous new word in Dutch language in 2012,” he said.

Attributes of slow-growing broilers

Toudic presented data showing welfare and carcass quality advantages for slower-growing broilers. Pertinent to the welfare messaging...
of the plofkip chicken campaign, a Dutch study evaluated chicken’s walking ability and showed that slow-growing broilers have three times less trouble in walking compared to conventional chickens.

**Slower growth’s nutritional features**

He also cited potential advantages for slower broiler growth in the lower fiber section for progeny of Label Rouge females which prevents myopathy lesions (white striping and woody breast).

Additionally, progeny from the slow-growing Label Rouge breeding stock has higher fillet dry matter and higher protein content compared to...
conventional broilers. And the intermediate cross (as used for RSPCA, Certified and BLK 1-Star breeds) has more dry matter and protein and lower fat content.

**Improved tenderness and flavor profile**

Age is the main factor involved in the evolution of tenderness, juiciness and flavor, according to data presented. However, the research report stipulated that the best compromise varies with eating culture and experience.

**The consumer and the citizen**

“Consumers are looking for price, convenience, food safety and taste in the chicken they buy,” Toudic said. But more and more consumers are equally concerned about the price and the animal welfare aspects associated with their chicken consumption, he indicated.

“With the consumer-citizen no longer having any relationship to agriculture, they follow social networks and are influenced by the animal welfare associations. The consumer often acts differently to the citizen, but the general population’s awareness of all of these issues is growing,” he concluded.