

→ to look after animal welfare. We do a survey each year of around 5,000 customers and looking after animal welfare is always in the top 10.”

Throup says Morrisons is “absolutely” still committed to standard Red Tractor chicken, and will stock standard alongside the new range. “This is part of our journey to continually improve chicken welfare but it is a range of this and of course we will continue to be 100% British and 100% Red

Tractor,” she says. “Customers know Red Tractor, and they recognise Red Tractor as meaning something really good, so that is important.”

Other changes are afoot on the poultry farms supplying Morrisons. Last year, the retailer began requiring the farms that supply it to hatch chicks in the barns where they are reared. It will convert its entire chicken supply base to this method of production by 2023, says Throup.

“I think it is a brilliant innovation,” she says. “They have immediate access to feed and water and movement and their environment and no transport stress.”

Advances in building design that allow units to be perfectly thermally regulated mean this is becoming an increasingly viable option for more farms. “By 2023 we want 100% of our fresh poultry to be produced in this way,” she says. “We are well underway to produce that now.” **PB**

THE HUBBARD REDBRO: THE LATEST PREMIUM BROILER BREED

The Hubbard Redbro is a completely new slower growing breed of broiler that has been developed by Hubbard specifically with the European Chicken Commitment / Better Chicken Commitment (ECC/ BCC) in mind.

Paul van Boekholt, of Hubbard, says the Redbro had been developed to provide the best

‘compromise between very good animal welfare outcomes, with economics and environment’.

Based on Hubbard’s slower-growing JA787 bird, the Redbro has similar animal welfare outcomes, but grows on average 8% faster with 0.4% higher breast meat yield. Feed conversion is about 9 points lower.

“It is more economically viable and its carbon footprint will be lower than a JA787,” says van Boekholt. “It will be more affordable. And because it grows faster and eats less, it will have less impact on carbon footprint than the slower growing breeds in the market at the moment.”

Crucially, following two years of trials in the UK and France, it has been approved by the ECC/BCC technical working group as an accredited breed. It will be made available commercially as parent stock from April this year.

Van Boekholt says several of the NGOs involved in the BCC understand the importance of pragmatism. “If they want to change the industry, they will have to go for something that is somewhat closer to conventional production, that is affordable to the masses, and the Hubbard Redbro as one of the key solutions to make it affordable to the masses.

“You can always drive for the maximum [growing time], but it will have minimum impact. This solution will have a much bigger impact on the market. Otherwise, you might reach 1% of the market, rather than 20%.”

The BCC is a big issue for everybody in the poultry industry at the moment. Among the major companies that have committed to convert all their chicken production to the BCC by 2026 are KFC, Greggs, Nando’s, Pizza Express, Waitrose, M&S, Unilever, Nestle, and Hello Fresh.

Van Boekholt says if you look at all the commitments made, “it could easily add up to three million broilers per week,

which equals 20% of the UK production.”

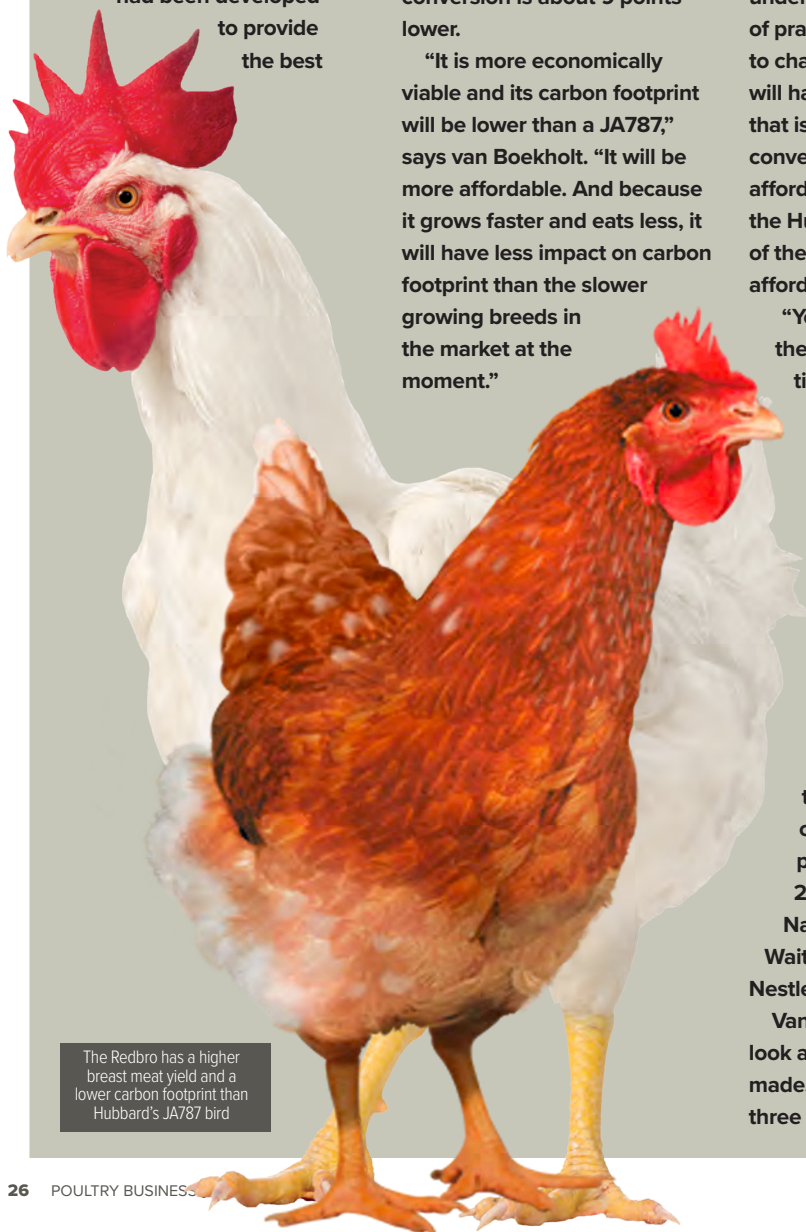
What is unknown is how quickly this will happen. Although the companies have another five years to switch production, it could happen a lot faster than this. And other companies could end up joining in rapid succession.

Van Boekholt cites the example of the Netherlands, where in 2013, under considerable pressure from animal rights groups, all the country’s leading retailers announced together that they would stop selling standard chicken by 2020. However, just nine months later, the Netherlands’ biggest supermarket Albert Heijn made the decision to convert its chicken production straight away, prompting a domino effect among all the other retailers.

“The big difference compared to any other country in the world is that all the retailers made that decision together,” says van Boekholt. “They made the decision to change 100% to slower growing, so now there is no conventional broiler meat in the supermarkets anymore.”

It is possible something similar could happen in the UK, he says.

“The limit is 2026. But will everyone wait until then or will Tesco or Morrisons also say we are committed and everybody else will follow? It is a big question for everybody.”



The Redbro has a higher breast meat yield and a lower carbon footprint than Hubbard’s JA787 bird