

Collective Position Statement on Backyard Poultry

Background

In the past year, shelters and sanctuaries in urban and suburban areas have witnessed a dramatic increase in the intake of chickens, particularly roosters. Hatcheries producing day-old chicks for shipment to feed stores and individuals are backlogged with orders. The desire to raise poultry can be linked to organic backyard farming as well as a desire to have direct access to food (eggs and, in some cases, meat).

As a coalition of animal sanctuaries interested in the welfare of hens and roosters, we have created this position statement on the keeping and raising of chickens. All of us have been inundated with calls to take in hens and roosters who are a) no longer wanted; b) not the correct sex; c) not legally permissible. As organizations with limited resources and space, it is no longer feasible to take in even a small percentage of these unwanted animals. Even with placement assistance, most of these chickens, particularly roosters, do not find permanent placement. This leaves municipal dog and cat shelters the task of taking in, housing, feeding, caring for, and inevitably killing healthy, adoptable chickens.

Problems associated with urban backyard flocks

Hatcheries are like puppy mills: When animals are reduced to commodities, their best interests are pushed aside in favor of profit. Hatcheries that produce chicks for backyard flocks treat chickens and their offspring in much the same way puppy mills treat breeding dogs and their puppies. There are no legal requirements dictating how breeding hens and roosters are housed, meaning they may be crammed into small cages or sheds without outdoor access.

Shipping day-old chicks is cruel: Most chickens purchased are bought from hatcheries or feed stores (these chicks originate from hatcheries). Hatcheries ship day-old birds through the postal service without any legal oversight. Young chickens are deprived of food and water for up to 72 hours and exposed to extremes in temperature. As Dr. Jean Cypher, a veterinarian specializing in avian medicine states, “A day-old chick can no more withstand three days in a dark crowded box than can any other newborn.” Other experts in avian medicine and behavior agree that transporting day-old chicks in boxes for the first 24-72 hours of life is cruel and medically detrimental to the birds.

Chicken sexing is more art than science: Using data collected from sanctuaries and rescues that field calls daily about unwanted chickens, we estimate between 20-50% of purchased “hens” are actually roosters. Depending on breed, visually identifying a rooster can take weeks to months.

Roosters may be unwanted and are often illegal: Male chickens are generally unwanted for two reasons: They don’t produce eggs and they are rarely legal in urban or suburban settings. Hatcheries may use rooster chicks as packing material, regardless of whether they were ordered. Most incorporated or urban regions that do permit chickens only allow hens, not roosters. Unwanted roosters may be abandoned to the streets, slaughtered, or

end up in a municipal shelter to be killed. Very few find their way into a permanent home or sanctuary.

Chickens attract rodents: Even the cleanest coop is attractive to rats and mice who enjoy the free bedding (straw and shavings) and food. Rodents are generally viewed as pests and their presence is unwanted by chicken owners and neighbors.

Lack of professional medical care: Avian medicine has made progress but there are few vets specialized in the treatment and care of birds. Veterinarians who do treat poultry are often expensive, with the average vet visit starting at a minimum of \$100.

Concerns with new ordinances allowing backyard poultry

Enforcement costs: Municipal shelters run on a tight budget dealing with animal cruelty cases, dangerous dog calls, and the normal day to day operation of their facilities. Adding an extra burden, like enforcing chicken licensing laws and related complaints, is unwise amidst current economic concerns.

Slaughter: The average chicken guardian is ill-equipped to “properly” stun and kill a chicken. Further, slaughtering can be traumatic for neighbors, including impressionable children. If chickens are to be permitted in urban areas, they must be protected from cruel mistreatment as much as “traditional” companion animals like dogs or cats, including a ban on slaughtering them for consumption.

Roosters will be killed: Creating new ordinances permitting chickens creates a market for killing 50% of all chicks born in hatcheries. Urban and suburban areas considering chickens generally ban roosters, yet male chickens comprise half of all chicks born. Hatcheries mail roosters as packing material, and sexing of chickens is more art than science (see above). When residents purchase chicks from hatcheries or feedstores and end up with roosters, they will be put in the position of having to rehome the bird(s). Most roosters *are not* rehomed and end up abandoned or dumped at shelters, where they are invariably killed.

Suggestions if you are considering a backyard flock

Make sure it's legal: If you live in an unincorporated area, contact your planning department and ask about the zoning requirements regarding poultry. If you live in an incorporated region, contact the city clerk for information on ordinances regarding chickens.

Adopt: Avoid the cruelties of the hatcheries by adopting birds already in existence who need homes. Check out www.petfinder.org for animals available at your local shelter. Visit www.sanctuaries.org or www.farmanimalshelters.org and contact a sanctuary near you about adopting birds. If they do not have birds, do not give up. Sanctuaries and rescues receive inquiries daily regarding animals needing homes – ask that you be contacted if one of these calls occurs.

Do your research: Chickens can be wonderful companions. While they are relatively easy to maintain, they do have special needs. Be sure to research housing, predator proofing, diet, and medical needs. Some things to be aware of:

- *Some breeds of chickens are cold-sensitive:* Hens and roosters with large single combs are prone to frost-bite in cooler climates. Make sure adequate housing accommodates birds in both cool and hot temperatures.
- *Predator protection is vital:* Chickens should be locked up at night in a safe enclosure that prevents access by all predators, including dogs, raccoons, aerial predators, rats, cats, wild canines, weasels, etc. During the day, animals should be housed in a fully-fenced enclosure or yard with proper protection from aerial, day-time predators and neighborhood dogs and, in the case of small bantams, large domestic free-roaming cats.
- *Veterinary care is critical:* Avian medicine is still considered an “exotic” practice and, as such, is more expensive. A one-time visit may start at \$100. Nevertheless, before considering housing chickens, it is imperative that they have access to veterinary care.

Supporting Organizations

[Animal Place](#)

[Chicken Run Rescue](#)

[The Chocowinity Chicken Sanctuary & Education Center, Inc.](#)

[Eastern Shore Sanctuary and Education Center](#)

[Farm Sanctuary](#)

[Sunnyskies Bird and Animal Sanctuary](#)

[United Poultry Concerns](#)

[Woodstock Animal Sanctuary](#)