

Amid Avian Flu Outbreak, Veterinarians Call for End to Controversial Poultry Kill Method

Veterinarians challenge AVMA and USDA rules that permit heatstroke killings and reward producers with taxpayer-funded bailouts.

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EINPresswire.com/ -- As avian influenza continues to devastate poultry flocks across the United States, veterinarians are advocating for the adoption of less cruel extermination methods.

Under the United States Department of Agriculture's (USDA) "stamping out" policy, infected poultry flocks should be killed en masse, or "depopulated" within 24-48 hours after being presumed positive.

According to a 2022 paper, Ventilation Shutdown Plus (VSD+) quickly became the most frequently used method on large flocks. The practice involves sealing up buildings, attaching heaters, and killing the birds inside via heatstroke over several hours.

Officials turn to the American Veterinary Medical Association's (AVMA) 2019 edition of the Guidelines for the Depopulation of Animals for methods of ending the lives of animals during emergencies and infectious disease outbreaks. The guidelines were created with the help of a \$36,000 grant from the USDA. The guidelines now guide USDA policy and allow indemnity payments to compensate producers for the loss of their animals when they are killed in accordance with the document.

But veterinarian Dr. Crystal Heath, Executive Director of the non-profit veterinary advocacy organization Our Honor, says that the allowance of killing with VSD+ means producers don't



Chickens caged on a truck parked outside a slaughterhouse in Stockton, California

have to plan to use less cruel methods. "The current guidelines allow for VSD+ to be used in constrained circumstances but do not adequately describe what those circumstances are," said Heath.

Heath reiterates that depopulation is not euthanasia, "Euthanasia is a word that should be used for the humane ending of a life of one who is suffering. In many cases, these methods are not humane, and the birds are not sick before they are killed.

Heath is not alone in her concerns about VSD+, [according to a poll](#) performed by the Veterinary Information Network of more than 3,000 veterinarians, only 1.1% believed VSD+ was an ethical and humane method of depopulation.

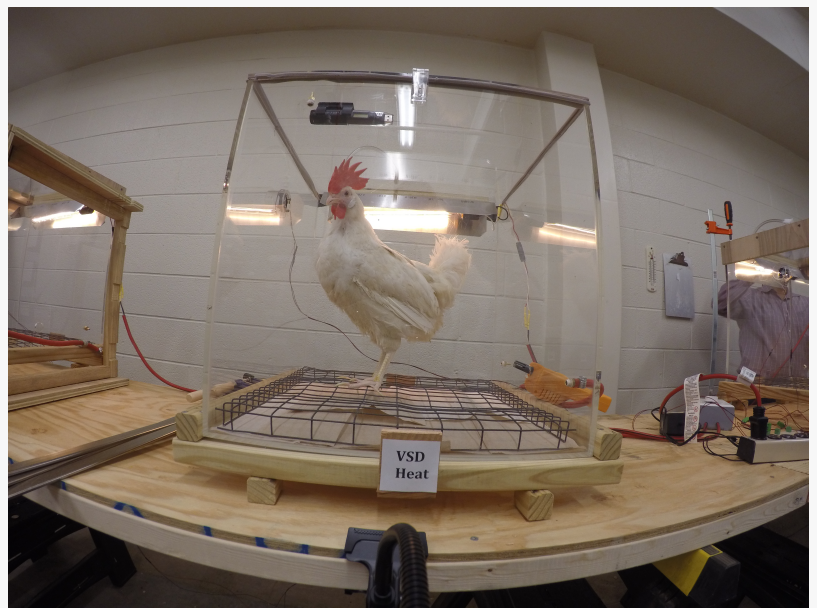


Image obtained by Animal Outlook via public records request of VSD experiments performed at the Prestage Department of Poultry Science at North Carolina State University

Our Honor has [tallied](#) USDA indemnity payments to companies that depopulated flocks due to avian influenza outbreaks. Jennie-O Turkey Store, which used VSD+ to exterminate some of its turkeys, was reported to be the largest recipient, receiving \$120 million in payments. The second-largest is likely to be Hickman's Egg Ranch in Arizona, which reportedly received over \$100 million.

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Erin Zamzow, DVM

“The AVMA's position allows billion-dollar corporations to get millions in bailouts after refusing to invest in less cruel methods of ending the lives of their animals,” says Dr Erin Zamzow, an Ellensburg, Washington-based veterinarian. Those less cruel methods include nitrogen gas and high-

expansion nitrogen foam. “The birds become unconscious in just a few minutes and pass away a few minutes later, compared to hours of suffering when VSD+ is used.”

[Documents obtained](#) via a Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) request by Our Honor show that VSD+ continues to be used regularly as a depopulation method, despite being listed as a method to be used only in “constrained circumstances.”

Some veterinarians are outraged by the AVMA's continued allowance of this method. San

Francisco-based veterinarian Dr. Moni Ramirez said, "Classifying VSD+ as permissible is a moral failure that betrays our professional oath to safeguard animal welfare."

The AVMA released a draft of the new edition of the depopulation guidelines last year, along with a month-long window for AVMA member veterinarians to comment on the guidelines. Instead of the depopulation methods listed in categories labeled "preferred," "constrained circumstances," and "not recommended," the new draft categorized killing methods into tiers. Tier 1 "methods are given highest priority and should be utilized preferentially;" tier 2 methods "may be considered only when the circumstances of the emergency constrain the ability to reasonably implement a Tier 1 method or when Tier 1 methods are unavailable." Tier 3 methods are described as having "limited to no evidence to support their use or evidence may be contrary to good animal welfare."

Heath says the new tiered system was likely developed to obfuscate the implications of these methods to the public. The draft listed VSD+ as a tier 2 method for poultry and a tier 3 method for pigs. Heath and others would like to see VSD+ listed as "not recommended" for all species.

The AVMA is expected to release a new edition of the Guidelines for the Depopulation of Animals in January.

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