

A Brief Analysis of How Controlled-Atmosphere Killing Improves Working Conditions over Electric Immobilization

With electric immobilization—the conventional poultry slaughter method in the U.S.—live birds are dumped out of crates and forced into shackles by workers, are immobilized by an electrically charged water bath, have their throats slit by a “killing” machine, and are scalded to death in defeathering tanks.

With controlled-atmosphere killing (CAK), birds—still in the transport crates that they arrived in—are placed in chambers, where their oxygen is replaced with a mixture of inert gasses, efficiently and gently putting them “to sleep.” After they are dead, they are shackled, bled, and defeathered.

In addition to causing immense suffering for birds (i.e. broken bones, bruising, hemorrhaging and live-throat slitting and –scalding) and decreasing product quality and yield, the electric immobilization process results in extremely poor working conditions:

- Because workers handle live birds, the light in slaughterhouses needs to be kept very low (to try to calm birds) leading to increased accident rates.
- Flapping birds also kick up dust and debris leading to increased incidences of respiratory problems.
- Struggling birds are hard for workers to handle and can be dangerous. Workers are injured by flapping/pecking birds and by their own knives when attempting to kill animals that have missed the “killing” machine.
- Scared and injured birds defecate and vomit, often on workers.

These conditions result in abnormally high turnover rates. The average slaughterhouse turnover rate is between 75 and 100 percent each year.

In addition to eliminating animal welfare problems, improving product yield and quality, and decreasing contamination, CAK also improves working conditions:

- Because workers do not handle live, flapping birds—and because lighting levels can be increased and dust levels decreased—overall working conditions are improved, fewer injuries are sustained by workers, and birds do not vomit or defecate on workers. Hanging areas remain calm, clean and brightly lit—turning hanging into a desirable job.
- Because workers must be trained to operate the gas levels and other aspects of CAK equipment, slaughterhouse employees have more opportunities for learning new skills and advancement.
- One CAK plant in Michigan reports an annual turnover rate of only 20 percent; the industry average is 375-500 percent as high as this plant’s rate.
- The turnover rate among hangers at an MBA plant in Tecumseh, Nebraska dropped by at least 75 percent after they installed CAK. According to the plant owner, “Before, every week there was a new person. Now, it’s one of the nicer jobs in the plant.”
- A Le Clezio plant in France switched to CAK after its live hangers went on strike over working conditions and were backed up by the rest of the plant’s union employees. The plant now touts the improved ergonomics.
- The Canadian Food Inspection Agency looked into CAK and concluded, “The environment for the [personnel] working in the poultry stunning area is also very much improved... Dust is reduced since unconscious birds are placed on the evisceration line.”
- The owner of an Emsland plant in Germany that installed CAK explained, “the system is boosting quality of life for the hangers... There’s better working conditions for the team.”

For more information, including a detailed report on CAK and electric immobilization, please contact Matt Prescott at 757-962-8264 or via e-mail at MattPrescott@peta.org.



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**PEOPLE FOR THE ETHICAL
TREATMENT OF ANIMALS**

501 FRONT ST.
NORFOLK, VA 23510
Tel. 757-622-PETA
Fax 757-622-0457

PETA.org
info@peta.org

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