



## THE HUMANE SOCIETY OF THE UNITED STATES

January 26, 2022

Chair Michael J. Webert and members of the Agriculture, Chesapeake and Natural Resources Committee  
1000 Bank Street  
Richmond, VA 23219

**RE: HB 830**

Dear Chair Webert and members of the Agriculture, Chesapeake and Natural Resources Committee,

My name is Molly Armus, and I am the Virginia State Director of the Humane Society of the United States. We are concerned about how HB 830 could impact workers and animals, and we are asking the committee to please consider modifications to the bill. We respectfully urge the committee to establish incentives to help Virginia farmers while simultaneously improving animal welfare in two key ways: offering incentives for producers to transition to more worker and animal friendly-controlled atmosphere stunning in poultry processing facilities, and providing assistance for Virginia egg producers to transition to cage-free housing for egg-laying hens.

Currently, over 9 billion chickens are processed for human consumption in the United States per year. When the birds arrive at poultry processing facilities, workers hang the birds upside down by putting their legs into moving shackles. The shackles drag the birds through an electrified water tank to immobilize them, but the U.S. electrical settings are not sufficient to consistently render the birds unconscious. The birds are then moved along to a mechanical neck slicer, which is meant to kill them, before being submerged into a tank of scorching hot water to loosen their feathers. However, since the automated knife can miss struggling or improperly shackled birds, some may be fully conscious and end up being scalded alive.

Birds often scratch and claw at the workers as they struggle. According to the Occupational Health and Safety Administration, during the shackling process, workers can get covered in blood, feces and pathogens from the chickens. The U.S. Government Accountability Office notes that poultry processing employees continue to face dangers at work, and workers had some of the highest number of severe injuries compared to other industries.

There is a superior alternative to the current system. Controlled Atmosphere Stunning (“CAS”) is carried out by passing birds in their transport crates through a chamber containing gas, typically carbon dioxide. This gas is not poisonous, but causes death by anoxia. Using the CAS system, chickens are not shackled until after they are insensible. For worker safety, CAS is far superior to conventional slaughter methods. Handling birds only after they are unconscious prevents injuries associated with repeated handling of thrashing chickens. CAS systems are cleaner working environments, as the birds are not moving so they produce less feather dander and no fecal droppings.

The animal welfare benefits are also significant. World-renowned animal welfare scientist and member of the Meat Industry Hall of Farm, Dr. Temple Grandin, says that CAS results in less stress for birds. The meat industry’s trade publication Meat + Poultry Magazine notes that CAS “has proven to be one of the most reliable methods for attaining consistency in terms of good animal welfare and meat quality.”

While only a tiny percentage of chickens in the United States are killed by CAS, some of the largest chicken companies like Perdue Farms, Wayne Farms, and Tyson Farms, as well as numerous smaller producers are starting to use the method and attest to its superiority. Dozens of major food companies including McDonald's have mandated that all their chicken meat come from CAS processing facilities.

There's a huge opportunity for Virginia producers and processing facilities to transition to CAS, a system that is much better for workers and animals, while benefitting the Commonwealth's economy. Virginia should be a leader by offering financial incentives for chicken producers and processing facilities to phase out electrical slaughter methods in favor of CAS.

Further, as Virginia continues its support for agriculture during this time of economic turmoil, we also ask the committee to consider incentives for egg producers to assist in their conversion to cage-free systems. Consumers and food corporations are exerting pressure on the egg industry to convert rapidly to cage-free housing for hens. Responding to demand from their customers, more than 200 of the country's largest companies have pledged to switch exclusively to cage-free eggs, including McDonald's, Walmart, Giant Food Stores, Food Lion, and Aldi. In addition, legislatures have passed cage-free laws in seven states including Nevada, Oregon, Washington, Michigan, Colorado, California and Massachusetts that ban the sale of eggs from caged chickens, creating a further demand for cage-free eggs.

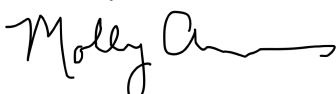
Egg producers are racing to respond. New USDA statistics show that approximately 34% of the U.S. egg flock is cage-free, up from just 4% a decade ago. Approximately 111.1 million hens are now cage-free, but the USDA calculates that number will have to increase to 225 million hens in order to fulfill corporate pledges in the upcoming years.

While the industry itself will shoulder most of this cost, the Virginia legislature can provide support to Virginia egg producers. Incentives like tax breaks, grants, and other incentives would not only help producers meet market demands, they would also bolster the agriculture and construction sectors in rural Virginia communities. Quite simply, building barns—all the while meeting a growing market—is good for Virginia's economy. Meanwhile, animal protection organizations like the Humane Society of the United States support state incentives because a faster transition to cage-free will allow more animals to engage in their natural behaviors.

For these reasons, we respectfully encourage the committee to modify the bill and use existing economic incentive programs, including the Governor's Agriculture and Forestry Industries Development (AFID) Fund, to provide funding for these important upgrades.

Thank you for your time and the opportunity to testify on this matter.

Sincerely,



Molly Armus

Virginia State Director

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