



MERCY FOR  
ANIMALS

# U.S. RETAILER REPORT ON ANIMAL WELFARE 2021

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*Company Progress on Broiler Chicken Welfare*

## Summary

Each year, over nine billion chickens raised for meat (known as “broilers”) are killed in the United States, more than any other land animal used for food. Over the past several years, hundreds of restaurants, foodservice companies, manufacturers, and hospitality brands have adopted the Better Chicken Commitment, a set of improved animal care standards to address the most pressing welfare issues associated with broilers. In response to this trend and growing public demand, supermarket chains have begun publishing their own meaningful chicken welfare policies. This report ranks major U.S. retailers on these efforts, highlighting those that are leading the way and those that have failed to take action.

## Introduction

Standard practices in the chicken industry would shock most consumers. The overwhelming majority of broiler chickens in the United States have been aggressively bred for rapid growth, which frequently results in immobility, organ stress, and heart disease. Birds live crowded together in sheds on waste-soaked litter, which leads to ammonia burns and respiratory problems. They are killed at five to seven weeks of age, typically through live-shackle slaughter, a method whereby chickens are shackled upside down while fully conscious and dragged through electrified water.

After incredible momentum across the food industry to prohibit keeping egg-laying hens in wire battery cages, more than 200 companies turned their attention to the

other chickens in their supply chains: broilers. These leaders—including Popeyes, Burger King, Subway, Unilever, Kraft Heinz, Compass Group, Sodexo, Aramark, and Nestlé—adopted the [Better Chicken Commitment](#) (BCC), establishing minimum animal welfare requirements regarding breed, environment, and slaughter practices for their chicken suppliers. In recent months, several retailers—members of the food sector that buy the most chicken—have published groundbreaking broiler welfare policies of their own. Unfortunately, many major U.S. retailers remain behind on this issue, falling far short of their customers’ expectations for the treatment of animals used for food.

**This report ranks retailers according to their efforts to address the most pressing welfare issues associated with broiler chickens. For companies that have published commitments, their policies are evaluated against the following Better Chicken Commitment standards:**

- Reducing stocking density to 6 lb./sq. ft. and prohibiting broiler cages
- Providing birds with litter, lighting, and enrichments that meet BCC standards
- Processing chickens in a manner that avoids pre-stun handling and instead uses a multistep controlled-atmosphere processing system that induces an irreversible stun
- Adopting higher-welfare breeds, such as those approved by Global Animal Partnership or the RSPCA
- Complying with all standards via third-party auditing



# Retailer Rankings

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## Leading the Industry in Broiler Welfare

The following companies have demonstrated clear leadership on animal welfare by adopting BCC standards. We commend them for their commitment to addressing this key animal welfare issue and for publishing strong, meaningful policies.

- Giant Eagle
- Natural Grocers
- PCC Community Markets
- Sprouts Farmers Market
- Whole Foods Market

## Initiating Work on Broiler Welfare

The following companies have begun making progress on broiler welfare by publishing policies aligned with some BCC components. We encourage them to develop complete policies that align with all BCC components.

- Ahold Delhaize USA (brands include Food Lion, Giant, and Stop & Shop)
- Albertsons (brands include Albertsons, Safeway, and Vons)
- Kroger (brands include Kroger, Harris Teeter, and Ralphs)
- Meijer

## Lagging on Broiler Chicken Welfare

To date, the following companies have not published broiler chicken welfare policies that meaningfully address the most critical welfare concerns. Of companies with published policies at all, standards fall short of those of the BCC. They have failed to ban practices that promote the greatest suffering in their broiler chicken supply chains.

- ALDI
- BJ's Wholesale Club
- Golub Corporation (brands include Price Chopper and Market 32)
- H-E-B
- Hy-Vee
- Publix
- Raley's
- Southeastern Grocers (brands include Winn-Dixie, Fresco y Más, and Harveys)
- Stater Bros. Markets
- Target
- Trader Joe's
- Wakefern (brands include ShopRite, Price Rite, and The Fresh Grocer)
- Walmart (brands include Walmart and Sam's Club)
- Wegmans
- Weis Markets





## New Footage Exposes Industry-Standard Cruelty to Chickens

In 2021, a new high-profile exposé revealed to millions of Americans the incredible suffering broiler chickens regularly endure at factory farms.

In early February, Mercy For Animals released undercover footage that [documented troubling conditions at a Costco chicken supplier](#). The footage, first [covered by the New York Times](#), shows tens of thousands of birds crowded in filthy sheds, living for weeks in their own waste. Many birds suffered from open wounds, ammonia burns, broken bones, and twisted necks and beaks.

Shortly after the investigation's release, Costco published a statement that it would evaluate potential changes for its chicken operations. In September, Costco published an updated broiler welfare statement outlining new steps the company would take to begin elevating the animal care standards for broiler chickens in its supply chain. They include reducing stocking density and trialing environmental enrichments at its vertically integrated chicken supplier, Lincoln Premium Poultry, which raises more than 100 million chickens per year; engaging its breeding stock suppliers on improving leg strength for chickens and reducing mobility problems; and exploring transitions to controlled-atmosphere stunning at additional suppliers.

This report serves as a follow-up to the Costco investigation to highlight retailers that have since taken action to address broiler welfare in their own supply chains and other retailers that have not.

Many retailers stand behind guidelines from the National Chicken Council (NCC), an association [representing companies that account for 95 percent of all broiler chickens raised and slaughtered in the United States](#). These guidelines simply codify standard factory farming practices and are woefully inadequate to prevent the worst suffering for chickens.

The group's misleading 2017 "[Chicken Guarantees](#)," for example, boast that broiler chickens are raised cage-free and not given hormones or steroids. But broiler chickens are not caged in the United States—the "cage-free" label is meaningful only in regard to laying hens—and hormones and steroids in poultry have been banned by the government since the 1950s.

Given the NCC's failure to establish guidelines that would create tangible welfare improvements for chickens in the meat industry, the [absence of any federal legal protections](#) for broiler chickens, and the exemption of poultry from the [Humane Methods of Slaughter Act](#), it is currently incumbent on food companies to publish their own meaningful animal welfare policies for chickens. And this is precisely what many of them have done.

## Progress from the Food Industry

In response to the urgent need for improved welfare standards for broiler chickens, [more than 200 companies in North America](#) and more than [400 companies around the globe](#) have committed to implementing a set of improved welfare standards for broiler chickens in their supply chains. These standards, known in North America as the Better Chicken Commitment, require suppliers to take

steps necessary to address the most pressing concerns associated with broiler chicken production. These include adopting breeds that demonstrate improved welfare outcomes, giving chickens more space and enrichments to express natural behaviors, and transitioning from live-shackle slaughter to controlled-atmosphere stunning. View the full standards [here](#).

## U.S. Retail Sector Outlook

Historically, other food sectors are the first to act on animal welfare issues, with retailers following their lead. Also, companies in Europe have typically moved before those in the United States. Previously seen with cage-free egg commitments, these patterns are again emerging for broiler welfare, as policies adopted by retailers throughout Europe are becoming industry standards.

In the United States, the majority of large retailers now have cage-free egg commitments in place, and many are making substantial progress on implementation. But only recently have major retailers begun to publish meaningful broiler welfare policies. This imbalance in addressing chicken welfare, prioritizing chickens raised

for eggs over those raised for meat, is troubling when the relative population size of these animals is taken into account. For every laying hen in the United States, about 30 broiler chickens are killed each year.

Today, the first wave of U.S. retail leaders on chicken welfare has emerged. Whole Foods Market, the standard bearer for animal welfare in the country, adopted the Better Chicken Commitment in 2020. Giant Eagle, the 11th-largest U.S. supermarket, and Sprouts Farmers Market, the 14th-largest, published BCC policies in summer 2021. Natural Grocers did the same while also reporting impressive progress on its commitment. And recently, Kroger and Albertsons—the country’s two largest supermarket companies—took significant first steps by publishing policies that adopt several BCC components for 50 percent of specific private-label product lines.

For now, several companies highlighted in this report stand apart as leaders on animal welfare. Mercy For Animals urges all supermarkets, grocers, and other food retailers to take decisive action to address the most pressing issues associated with chickens used for meat by publishing broiler chicken welfare policies that meet the minimum standards of the Better Chicken Commitment.

