

Purchaser's Guide To Sourcing Sustainable Poultry



U.S. hospitals and long-term care facilities buy millions of dollars worth of poultry products each year, mostly chicken. Most is purchased from a few dominant companies—Tyson Foods Inc., Pilgrim's Pride Corporation, Perdue Farms Inc., Jennie-O Turkey Store, Inc. and Patuxent Farms (US Foodservice brand). These companies sometimes produce their own poultry, but more typically contract with growers to produce broilers (chickens raised for meat) and/ or turkey indoors, in large-scale

operations¹ also called concentrated animal feeding operations (CAFOs).

Their scale, the effects of concentrating the birds and their waste geographically, and the heavy reliance on routine feed additives such as antibiotics and arsenic compounds, combine to make the typical operations unsustainable. CAFOs are implicated in a wide range of environmental and human health, socioeconomic, worker safety and animal welfare issues.

Impacts of Large-Scale Poultry Production

Antibiotics: Antibiotics are routinely and legally added to poultry feeds in large-scale production. An estimated 70 percent of all U.S. antibiotics are in fact fed to poultry, swine, and beef cattle for nontherapeutic reasons—growth promotion, feed efficiency, and to compensate for the heightened risk of infection in raising animals under confined, often unhygienic conditions.² Routine use of antibiotics in animals contributes significantly to the human epidemic of infections from bacteria resistant to antibiotic treatment.³ Antibiotic-resistant pathogens from these farms routinely contaminate retail meats and can infect consumers handling or undercooking it.⁴ A substantial percentage of antibiotic-resistant Salmonella comes from use of antibiotics in food animals.^{5,6} Farm workers and their families can become directly colonized with resistant bacteria.⁷ And, contaminated manure spreads resistance throughout the environment that bacteria inhabit—everywhere.

Arsenic compounds: Large-scale producers routinely feed arsenic (in the form of the organic arsenic compound, roxarsone) to at least 70 percent of U.S.-raised broiler chickens, as well.⁸ The FDA-approved uses are for growth promotion, feed efficiency and meat pigmentation. Some arsenic ends up in chicken meat, but much of it passes through the birds into chicken litter, typically ending up in soil and water.⁹ Organic

arsenic is converted into cancer-causing inorganic arsenic by bacteria in soil in as little as 10 days.¹⁰

Poultry Waste: Large-scale poultry production equals large-scale waste issues. More than 8.7 billion U.S. broiler chickens raised each year will generate an estimated 26 to 55 billion pounds of litter or waste,^{11,12,13} also creating a huge disposal problem concentrated in relatively few geographic areas—for example, the Delmarva peninsula, the Appalachian region, the Southeast and the Mississippi Delta.¹⁴ Turkey production is similarly concentrated.¹⁵ Approximately 90 percent of poultry waste is currently applied to fields and cropland as “fertilizer.”¹⁶ Also, poultry litter is fed to beef cattle^{17,18} and sold as fertilizer in home garden stores.

Threats to workers: Poultry growers and workers suffer high rates of eye infections, respiratory ailments, and other health problems, in part from the toxic brew of volatile gases and particles—including degrading manure, antibiotics, bacteria and dust—in poultry barns.¹⁹ One in five poultry workers is injured on the job.²⁰ Repetitive stress injuries, lacerations and amputations are common.²¹ Also, the U.S. Department of Labor found substantial violations of the Fair Labor Standards Act when conducting surveys of poultry processing plants in 1997 and again in 2000.²²

Fairness: Poultry growers and workers are poorly compensated. Nationwide, 71.6 percent of poultry farmers earn below poverty level income for their poultry operations;²³ the average poultry worker with two children living on the Delmarva peninsula, one of the larger poultry producing regions in the US, qualifies for food stamps, low income home energy assistance, Head Start and school lunches.²⁴ In contrast, poultry integrators (Tyson Foods, Gold Kist, Pilgrim's Pride, etc.) earn a 10-25 percent rate of return on equity.²⁵ This economic disparity is created by a complex set of factors that ultimately force poultry growers to assume much of the risk, but reap none of the rewards.²⁶

Animal husbandry: Broilers and turkeys are provided an average of 0.8-1.0 sq. ft. to 3 sq. ft., respectively, in an indoor, industrial-scale poultry operation.²⁷ Four percent of broilers²⁸ and between 10-12 percent of turkeys²⁹ die prematurely from the crowding and unsanitary conditions. Four percent of 8.7 billion birds is 348 million dead chickens annually. Turkeys commonly have their beaks trimmed and are easily injured if moved improperly.³⁰ Additionally, as a result of intensive genetic manipulation to produce faster growing, uniform birds with large breasts, birds suffer from skeletal, reproductive, heart and circulatory problems.^{31,32}

For an in-depth review of the negative impacts of large-scale poultry production see the Health Care Without Harm (HCWH) *Poultry Primer* at www.healthyfoodinhealthcare.org.

Sustainable Poultry Production

Though industrialized production has become the norm, there are viable alternative methods of raising poultry that do not rely on the nontherapeutic use of antibiotics or arsenic compounds, animal byproducts in feed, total confinement, etc. and thus are more sustainable. There is no universally recognized definition of the term “sustainable,” however proponents of sustainable agriculture generally suggest that sustainable poultry operations have most or all of the following attributes:

- **High quality feed and water** – No arsenicals, antibiotics, or animal byproducts used as feed or water additives.
 - **Proper manure/nutrient management** – Number of animals raised per farm/operation does not exceed carrying capacity of land owned by the individual grower. Poultry waste does not contain arsenic or antibiotic residues; is applied to land at appropriate agronomical rates to avoid exceeding the land’s capacity to absorb phosphorus and nitrogen and, if necessary, is stored appropriately to prevent runoff into local waterways.
 - **Fair compensation and high labor and safety standards for workers** – Employees are paid a living wage and are provided basic benefits including worker compensation, disability, and unemployment coverage, regular rest breaks and access to adequate medical care.
 - **Freedom of association and collective bargaining** – Growers and workers have freedom of association and the right to organize and engage in collective bargaining free from retaliation of any kind by the poultry integrator/buyer; and growers and workers are not barred from access to representatives of organizations assisting them in exercising these rights.
 - **Fair compensation for growers** – Companies will enter into transparent contracts with growers that provide a fair rate of return on grower’s investment in poultry houses and equipment and whenever possible an ownership stake in the company.
 - **Humane animal treatment** – The poultry farm or operation prohibits practices such as: beak trimming, confinement of animals other than to temporarily protect flock health and welfare, cloning and use of genetically engineered animals. If animals are confined, birds are provided adequate space per animal, adequate ventilation, natural lighting and frequent bedding cleanout.
- **Full commitment** – Poultry farm or company is fully committed to producing **all** poultry products to a minimum standard of sustainability e.g., not an operation that uses industrial practices to produce most poultry with a single line of poultry produced without nontherapeutic use of antibiotics or arsenic.
 - **Proximate to purchaser** – Poultry farm or company and processing facility is located as close as possible to the customer to allow for purchase of fresh products, minimize energy use and carbon dioxide (CO₂) emissions related to delivery and contribute to health of the local or regional economy.

Sourcing Sustainable Poultry

Prioritizing Attributes for Purchasing

Though all of the attributes listed above are important, we encourage health care purchasers to prioritize the following:

1. **High quality feed and water** – Specifically, support poultry companies that prohibit the use of antibiotics and arsenic compounds in feed or water. **Rationale:** Companies eliminating these practices will not only reduce the associated threats to ecological and human health, but will also likely have had to implement better hygiene, animal welfare and other practices.
2. **Proximate** – Support the closest practicable growers/companies who, at a minimum, prohibit the use of antibiotics and arsenic compounds in feed and water. **Rationale:** Taking this step encourages the re-diversification of poultry production which would hopefully lead to decreased concentration of waste, healthier rural economies nationwide and reductions in energy use and green house gas emissions.

Formalizing Commitment and Moving the Market

As large volume purchasers and organizations that contract on their behalf, hospitals and group purchasing organizations (GPOs) can significantly influence the practices of the U.S. poultry industry by expressing a preference for sustainably produced poultry.

The more formalized the purchasing criteria can be within an institution, regardless of the sustainable attributes prioritized, the easier it will be down the line to demand the level of quality sought. This may be accomplished in several ways including adoption of a broad sustainable food purchasing policy, a poultry specific purchasing policy and/or documents used as part of a contracting process such as requests for information (RFIs), requests for proposals (RFPs), product specifications and actual contract language. Even signing the Healthy Food in Health Care Pledge found at www.healthyfoodinhealthcare.org and sending a copy to suppliers will signal a commitment to

the market. A growing number of health care systems, U.S. food retailers, food service companies, and restaurant chains have formally adopted similar purchasing priorities e.g., Catholic Healthcare West,^{33,34} Kaiser Permanente,^{35,36} Whole Foods,³⁷ Bon Appétit,³⁸ and Chipotle.³⁹

Practical Considerations

■ Product Availability

The foodservice industry has grown to rely on the ready availability of highly processed, uniform poultry products, e.g., the boneless, skinless 4-ounce chicken breasts often recommended by hospital dietitians to ensure control over patient protein intake. While some mid-scale sustainable producers can provide these highly processed, uniform products, smaller scale sustainable poultry operations are more likely to sell whole or minimally processed birds. Small-scale operations may be also less likely to produce poultry year round. Supporting these growers may require hospitals to be flexible and creative in determining how to best use these poultry options for different menu applications or at different times of the year. [Note: The demand for breasts (white meat) of a uniform size has contributed to the intensive genetic manipulation and consequential animal welfare issues already mentioned, as well as, declines in genetic biodiversity among poultry breeds, and some perceived declines in taste.]

■ Cost

By their nature, industrial-scale facilities produce poultry with a low “sticker price” but with high, unseen costs borne by growers, workers, communities and the environment. Sustainably produced poultry is likely to cost more than conventionally produced poultry, but institutions may be able to reduce or offset these costs by: buying directly from local, sustainable growers; providing a market for poultry cuts that may be otherwise underutilized or less desirable in other markets, e.g. using more legs, thighs, and wings in general or just in the cafeteria; and using cost savings achieved in other parts of the foodservice budget to offset increases from purchasing sustainable poultry.

Finding Sources of Sustainably Produced Poultry

As nearly 100 percent of all broilers⁴⁰ and most turkeys in the U.S. are produced for companies that rely on industrial management practices,⁴¹ it can be quite challenging for institutions to find adequate supplies of poultry produced to meet even a few of the standards outlined above. Strategies vary depending on purchasing volume, control and power to influence.

Stand-alone hospitals-Individual hospitals are encouraged to:

- Use flexibility in contracts, waivers, etc. to buy poultry from the limited number of growers/ companies who are already producing poultry more sustainably, and

choose the closest practicable source. A short list of mid-to-large scale growers/companies who place meaningful limits on antibiotics and/or arsenic use can be found at www.healthyfoodinhealthcare.org. A list of more proximate growers that produce on a smaller scale can be found using the searchable database at www.eatwellguide.org. [Note: Growers that produce smaller quantities of poultry may be less likely to meet a large hospital’s complete supply needs without some level of collaboration on the part of producers. Smaller hospitals may be able to find an adequate supply. Consider using these growers for special events or catering. Call well in advance to confirm available supply and allow time to increase production to meet needs.]

- Communicate a preference for sustainably produced poultry to distributors and GPOs.

Hospital Systems/GPOs-Hospitals and GPOs are encouraged to:

- Contract with the limited number of growers/ companies who are already producing poultry more sustainably, and choose the closest practicable source. See above.
- Support proximate purchasing by making it easier for small to mid-scale growers/companies to bid for contracts using methods such as allowing local/ regional growers/companies to bid for a part of a regional or national contract.
- Communicate a preference for poultry produced without the use of antibiotics or arsenic in feed or water (and/or other sustainability attributes valued by your organization) to all current and potential suppliers.
- Require assurance that poultry has been produced according to your sustainability standards. Purchasers are encouraged to use the information below to avoid being misled by producer claims.

Tools You Can Use

■ Eco-labels

Several eco-labels⁴²—Animal Welfare Approved⁴³, Certified Organic,⁴⁴ Certified Humane Raised and Handled,⁴⁵ Food Alliance Certified,⁴⁶ and Free Farmed Certified,⁴⁷ have been developed to help purchasers identify poultry that has been produced to meet a variety of sustainability criteria. No one eco-label calls for all the attributes outlined herein. However, these eco-labels address a range of issues, sometimes overlapping, but generally complementary, and poultry products sometimes have been approved to carry more than one label. (For more details on criteria required to be met for each label see HCWH’s *Guide to Poultry Applicable Eco-*

labels at www.healthyfoodinhealthcare.org.) There are several advantages to buying poultry carrying one or more of these eco-labels:

- The standards are meaningful.
- An independent third party that has no vested interest in the outcome has audited the producers to determine if they have met the set standards. Reputable certifiers have the expertise and knowledge in these production systems, and know what to look for to verify claims.
- Hospitals will have assurance that their purchasing goals and intentions are being met without extra effort on the part of the institution.

- Purchasers will avoid being fooled by industry attempts at “greenwashing”—disinformation disseminated by an organization so as to present an environmentally responsible public image.”⁴⁸
- The adoption of certification is driven by customer demand, so institutions may have the purchasing power to broaden availability of all certified products.

[Note: Producers are usually the ones to pursue the use of one or more of these labels in order to differentiate their products and demonstrate their commitment, however, purchasers could increase the supply of products that meet a preferred standard e.g., Certified Humane Raised & Handled, by specifying it in contract related communications.]

Table 1. USDA Approved General Label Claims

Label Claim	Definition	Independent Assessment ⁴⁹
No antibiotics added	Federally recognized terms that mean no antibiotics have been used over the course of the animal’s life. Producers may make the claim on poultry product labels if sufficient documentation (an affidavit) is provided to the USDA.	Considered “somewhat” meaningful as the label claim is specific and subject to enforcement under truth in labeling laws, but there is no formal verification that antibiotics were not used.
Antibiotic-free	Considered “unapprovable” by the USDA and banned from use on poultry labels, as existing antibiotic-residue testing technology does not have the sensitivity to verify this claim. ⁵⁰	Not applicable
No hormones added	Federally recognized terms that mean that no hormones were used over the course of the animal’s life. As federal regulations prohibit the use of all hormones in poultry production, this claim can only be used on poultry product labels if the following statement is included “Federal regulations prohibit the use of hormones in poultry production.”	Though the statement is likely to be true given that the use of hormones in chicken production is illegal, using this label term to market poultry products is considered disingenuous.
Hormone free	Considered “unapprovable” by the USDA and banned from use on poultry and meat labels as all animals produce hormones naturally. ⁵¹	Not applicable
Free range or free roaming	Producers can use this term if they can demonstrate to the USDA that the poultry has been allowed “access” to the outside.	Not considered “meaningful,” in part because the period of access is undetermined e.g., five minutes per day of open-air access is considered adequate for USDA approval to use the claim.
Natural	This label can be applied to products that are only minimally processed (a process which does not fundamentally alter the raw products and contains no artificial ingredients or added colors. The label must explain the use of term, such as “no added coloring or artificial ingredients; minimally processed.”	Not applicable to sustainable farming practices.
No animal byproducts	Though commonly used, there are no government or official standards for this term.	Considered “somewhat” meaningful as the label claim is specific and subject to enforcement under truth in labeling laws, but there is no standard definition for the claim or formal verification.

■ USDA-approved general label claims

USDA has approved the use of several general label claims by poultry producers.⁵² There is little regulation of these claims, and most are not considered to be very meaningful so it is important to understand what they signify and to recognize misleading claims. In most cases these label claims only address a single production practice such as antibiotic or feed additive use. Of the USDA approved claims listed in **Table 1** that can be used to market poultry products (and meat), only two are considered even “somewhat meaningful”⁵³—“no antibiotics added” and “no animal byproducts.” The others are listed and assessed for the benefit of purchasers. [Note: At this point in time, there is no USDA-approved label claim related to arsenic use in poultry production.]

■ Poultry Survey

A sample poultry survey is available at www.healthyfood-inhealthcare.org. Purchasers can use the sample questions to learn more about the products available through an existing supplier. They can also be used as part of an RFI or RFP and the language can be easily adapted for contracts. The sample survey can also be adapted to reflect your institution’s purchasing criteria. If your institution works with a particular food distribution company, you can request that the distributor determine which products meet your specifications.

RESOURCES

The following poultry related documents are available at www.healthyfoodinhealthcare.org:

- Feeding Arsenic to Poultry: Is this Good Medicine?
- Antibiotic Resistance and Agricultural Overuse of Antibiotics: What Health Care Food Systems Can Do
- Sample Procurement Policy: Purchasing Meat, Poultry, Dairy and Seafood Without Inappropriate Antibiotic Sample Poultry Supplier Survey
- Supplier Lists for Better Chicken and Turkey Choices for the Environment and Human Health
- Purchasing Guide to Poultry-Applicable Eco-Labels
- Food Eco-Labels: A Purchasing Guide
- HCWH Policy Statement on Antibiotics in Food
- HCWH Position Statement on Genetically Engineered Food

ENDNOTES

- 1 The average U.S. poultry “farm” has two to six poultry houses containing 25,000 to 30,000 birds each, up to 150,000 birds in total for broilers. The average turkey flock has 13,000-17,000 birds with growers producing three flocks per year on average. National Research Council. (2003). *Air emissions from animal feeding operations* (pp.32-38). Washington, DC: The National Academies Press.
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- 3 Institute of Medicine, Board on Global Health. (2003). *Microbial threats to health: Emergence, detection, and response*. Washington, DC: National Academy of Sciences Press. Retrieved May 23, 2007, from <http://books.nap.edu/openbook.php?isbn=030908864X&page=R1#pagetop>.

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- 11 Nachman K.E., Graham, J.P., Price, L.B., & Silbergeld, E.K. (2005). Arsenic: A roadblock to potential animal waste management solutions. *Environmental Health Perspectives*, 113(9), 1123-1124.
- 12 Weaver, T. (1998). *Managing poultry manure reduces runoff. Poultry production and product safety research*. Fayetteville, AR.:University of Arkansas. Weaver estimated 6 billion broilers produced more than 9 million tons of poultry manure; with today’s higher broiler production figures, manure generated could be 40 percent higher than that stated.
- 13 Fontenot, J.P. & Hancock, J.W. (2001). Utilization of poultry litter as feed for beef cattle. Retrieved May 5, 2007, from <http://www.fda.gov/ohrms/dockets/dailys/01/Nov01/110501/ts00014.doc>. This source offers a somewhat different estimate of litter dry matter generated of 11.2 billion pounds annually. This is lower than Weaver’s estimate, even accounting for the 20-25 percent lower weight of dry litter as compared to manure.

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- 15 *Ibid.*
- 16 Cabrera, M.L. & J.T. Sims. (2000). Beneficial use of poultry by-products: Challenges and opportunities. In J.F. Power and W.A. Dick (Eds.) Land application of agricultural, industrial, and municipal by-products (pp. 425-450). Madison, WI: Soil Science Society of America.
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- 18 Sapkota, A.R., Lefferts, L.Y., McKenzie, S. & Walker, P. (2007). What do we feed to food-production animals? A review of animal feed ingredients and their potential impacts on human health. *Environmental Health Perspectives*, 115(5), 663-670.
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- 39 Chipotle Mexican Grill. (n.d.) *Food with integrity*. Retrieved June 1, 2007, from http://www.chipotle.com/flash/fwi_story
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- 41 *Ibid.*, p. 9.
- 42 A seal or logo indicating that a product has met a set of environmental or social standards.
- 43 Animal Welfare Institute, <http://www.animalwelfareapproved.org>
- 44 U.S. Department of Agriculture, <http://www.ams.usda.gov/NOP>
- 45 Humane Farm Animal Care, http://www.certified_humane.org
- 46 Food Alliance, <http://www.foodalliance.org>
- 47 American Humane Association, http://www.americanhumane.org/site/PageServer?pagename=pa_farm_animals_ff_mean
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