REVIEW OF THE
POULTRY CATCHING INDUSTRY
IN ENGLAND AND WALES

Prepared for

Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs
1A Page Street
LONDON
SW1P 4PQ

Food Standards Agency

Aviation House
125 Kingsway
LONDON
WC2B 6NH

Report Prepared by

Jason Gittins and Philip Canning
ADAS Poultry Consultancy Group
Ceres House
2 Searby Road
LINCOLN
LN2 4DW

Office Tel 01522 521290

October 2006

CONTENTS

SUMMARY

In recognition of the importance of catching to the maintenance of biosecurity on poultry farms, Defra and the Food Standards Agency have agreed to jointly sponsor an initiative to encourage good practices for poultry catching teams. This will be done through training which will concentrate on improving biosecurity and aspects of worker health protection.

Poultry catching requires a considerable labour input and it is normal practice to bring additional specialist staff onto farms to carry out this work. At present, there is little formal information available on the size, nature and organisation of the poultry catching industry in England and Wales. The present objective is to produce an overview of the catching industry structure and procedures. This is seen as fundamental to gaining an understanding of the industry and the associated biosecurity risks. The scope of the current work covers the catching of chickens, turkeys, ducks and end of lay hens for processing and this report has been prepared following meetings and discussions with a number of businesses in these sectors.

The total number of people involved in poultry catching is extremely difficult to determine, but our best estimate is that there may be around 550-650 full-time staff, with more than 50% of these being involved in the broiler chicken sector. The majority of poultry catchers are employed by specialist catching businesses which often cover more than one sector of the industry. Some integrated companies, particularly in the chicken and duck sectors directly employ their own in-house catchers.

Catchers are organised into catching teams, typically consisting of 4-6 people (often more for end of lay hens) under the control of a catching team leader. The job is physically demanding, often requiring long and anti-social hours and there can be considerable commercial pressure to complete the work on time. However, many staff are very experienced and there does not appear to be a very high staff turnover. Whilst the number of foreign workers has increased, the majority of catchers are British.

Catching practices necessarily vary according to poultry species. In terms of working procedures, a number of differences have been reported, particularly with regard to the use of protective clothing, type of footwear and the use of personal protective equipment. Moreover, the degree of implementation of these procedures is also likely to be variable, although in part, lack of facilities on-site and other issues may hamper catchers' attempts to follow planned procedures. There is a clear industry view that good biosecurity during catching should be seen as a shared responsibility and that catchers should feel part of a larger industry initiative.

There was enthusiasm for the concept of a training initiative for the catching industry. Even companies that appear to combine well thought-out biosecurity procedures with an equally high standard of implementation recognise that improvements can be made. However, many emphasised the need for a carefully planned approach to training, so that there were clear and concise messages and that the policies proposed were both specific and practical.

Based on our discussions, company-specific ('in-house') training sessions appear to be favoured, as opposed to the regional events originally proposed. It would be important to discuss the proposed messages with managers prior to training sessions and to resolve any issues that are likely to arise.

At this stage, we recommend that a pilot study of four in-house training sessions should initially be arranged, planned and delivered, these covering different sectors of the industry. On completion of these, the format, content and reaction of those involved should be evaluated before further sessions are arranged. Consideration should also be given to the provision of key messages in written format, based on existing Defra and Food Standards Agency literature. As well as providing a reminder to those who have received training, it would be useful to circulate to those who have not, including part-time and occasional catchers.

1.0 INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background

The adoption of best biosecurity practices is being actively encouraged on poultry farms in England and Wales. As well as being consistent with the requirements for good flock performance, biosecurity is critical to the prevention of disease spread. In recent times this has become a higher priority given the threat posed by Avian Influenza to both the health of the individual flock itself and to the health of poultry workers and their families.

The need for good biosecurity has also been highlighted by the Food Standards Agency, under the theme of 'Cleaner Farms, Better Flocks' and this is seen as central to the control of *Campylobacter* in poultry meat.

To date, much of the emphasis of biosecurity campaigns funded by Defra and the Food Standards Agency (FSA) has been placed on the procedures that should be followed by farm staff, in order to minimise the risk of disease spread. But the recent Defra-funded meetings for poultry producers on Avian Influenza and FSA-funded biosecurity workshops for broilers growers reinforced the widely-held view that the catching and loading of birds prior to their transportation from farms also carries a very high risk of biosecurity failures. Because of this, it was thought essential that those involved in this sector of the industry should play a full and active part in helping to identify areas of weakness and improving standards of biosecurity and hygiene.

Poultry catching requires a considerable labour input, because the birds are caught by hand. It is normal practice to bring additional specialist staff onto farms to carry out this work. Since many of these people are employed as full-time poultry catchers they move from farm to farm, hence increasing the risk of organisms being spread between sites.

In order to maintain high standards during catching, full commitment is needed to the principles and practices of good biosecurity, not only from the

catchers themselves but from farm owners, through the provision of appropriate facilities. It is also essential that vehicles and all equipment associated with catching (such as modules and fork-lift trucks) are clean when they arrive on farm and when they leave.

In recognition of the importance of catching to the maintenance of biosecurity, Defra and the Food Standards Agency have agreed to jointly sponsor an initiative to encourage good practices for poultry catching teams – practices that will help to safeguard the health of the birds and the health of poultry catchers and their families.

1.2 Objectives of this Report

At present, there is little formal information available on the size, nature and organisation of the poultry catching industry in England and Wales. The present objective therefore is to produce an overview of the structure of the industry, how it operates and typical operational procedures.

This review of catching is seen as fundamental to gaining an improved understanding of the associated biosecurity risks and the development of strategies for making improvements. The information contained in this report, based mainly on discussions with companies and key individuals will help to develop appropriate guidance material. It will also clarify the channels of communication for the provision of subsequent training etc.

2.0 METHODS

2.1 Scope of Review

This review examines the structure and scale of the poultry catching industry and sets out typical current commercial practices, with particular emphasis on biosecurity and those practices that might influence the health of workers and their families.

The report concentrates on the catching of poultry in preparation for final disposal and with reference to chickens, turkeys, ducks and end of lay hens, since the catching requirements are highest for these species. The catching of point-of-lay pullets prior to transport to egg laying facilities is outside the scope of this particular piece of work.

Finally, recommendations are made in section 8 for the development of a future training initiative for catchers, concentrating on improving biosecurity and aspects of worker health protection.

2.2 Industry Involvement

ADAS has held discussions with a number of businesses in the poultry industry to gain a better understanding of their current operating procedures and difficulties with regard to catching. These discussions have included both poultry meat processors (covering the various sectors of the industry) and businesses that provide catching services to the processors ('specialist catching businesses'). In addition to establishing the procedures of these particular companies, we have ascertained typical catching speeds for each species (in terms of the number of birds caught per hour) and the number of catchers employed or used by the various companies. From this, we have built up an overall picture of the size and structure of poultry catching operations in England and Wales.

As an adjunct to the above discussions, recent work by ADAS consultants on the current FSA-funded research project B15004 ('Measures and Best

Practice……when Broiler Flocks are Thinned') has provided some valuable insights into the procedures and on-farm practices of catchers involved in this sector of the industry.

2.3 Compilation of Results

An overview of the information obtained from, and the views expressed by the industry have been compiled into this review report. To maintain confidentiality, the views expressed are not attributable to individuals or businesses, but rather they are used to build up an overall picture.

3.0 OVERVIEW OF POULTRY CATCHING

3.1 Scale of Poultry Sectors

For the purposes of this report, the poultry industry is divided into four sectors, namely chickens (broilers), end-of lay hens (which includes hens kept for both eating egg and hatching egg production), turkeys and ducks.

In terms of bird numbers in England and Wales (see table below), the broiler chicken sector is by far the largest, accounting for some 90% of all the birds processed in 2005. It follows therefore that the largest requirement for catching is in the broiler sector, where the total annual figure of 666 million birds equates to some 12.7 million birds being caught in England and Wales each week.

	Millions of Birds (2005)	**Percentage of Total Poultry**
Chickens	666	90.5
End of Lay Hens	34	4.6
Turkeys	19	2.6
Ducks	17	2.3
Total Poultry	**736**	**100.0**

(Source of Statistics: Defra, except for duck numbers which are based on an industry estimate).

3.2 Estimated Number of Catchers

It is extremely difficult to accurately determine the total number of staff involved in the catching industry. This is in part because of the disparate nature of the industry itself, and also because a significant number of birds (especially end of lay hens on small units) are caught by farm staff, as an occasional task, rather than by full-time catching teams.

In the absence of published information on the number of people working as poultry catchers, the following estimates are made, first of all, on the basis of requirements for catching in each of the main sectors. We have subsequently cross-checked these figures by adding together the number of catchers quoted as being employed or used by processors in each sector. Finally, the figures for each sector have been presented to companies and sector bodies for comment. Whilst it is recognised that the figures are estimates only, they do provide an indication of the number of workers involved and hence the potential 'target audience' for future training initiatives.

a) Broilers

Without question, the broiler sector employs the largest number of full-time catchers. The following figures are based on three assumptions:

Assumption 1	12.7 million chickens caught each week in England and Wales
Assumption 2	Each 5-man catching team catches 6,000 chickens per hour (this includes the forklift driver but not the driver of the lorry)
Assumption 3	Each full-time person spends 40 hours per week catching (note that this does not include travel and preparation time on farm)

On the basis of these assumptions, it can be estimated that some 250-300 man years of work is required to catch the current number of chickens in England and Wales (note that this does not include any allowance for holidays and other absences). Our findings to date suggest that the vast majority of catchers operating in the broiler sector are full-time workers, although some may also occasionally catch turkeys, hens or ducks. On this basis, we concluded that the total number involved in catching chickens would not be substantially more than 300.

Whilst some have expressed broad agreement with this figure, others have commented that they believe it to be an under-estimate. Possible reasons

cited for this are that a) the figure of 6,000 birds caught per hour (assumption 2) may not be maintained, especially when catching heavier birds and b) because some teams catch for fewer than 40 hours per week (assumption 3 above). On this basis, the number of catchers may be more than originally estimated but is still considered unlikely to exceed 400.

It would be expected, given the respective sector sizes, that the catching requirements in other sectors of the industry would be less than this. Whilst this is the case, it must also be remembered that broilers can typically be caught and loaded at a faster rate than other species, hence the differences in man power needed are not as large as may be anticipated from the numbers of birds alone.

b) Turkeys

The number of turkeys that can be caught and loaded per hour is much lower than the number of broilers, but also very variable. The work is slower mainly because of the much heavier liveweight of turkeys. Depending on the actual weight, a 6 man team may typically catch and load 5,000 turkeys per day. On this basis, and after making allowance for turkeys grown in small quantities for seasonal production, catching on larger turkey units in England and Wales probably accounts for approximately 80 man years of work. In very broad terms therefore, it is estimated that there are around 100 full-time turkey catchers operating in England and Wales.

c) Ducks

Catching of ducks is also relatively slow in comparison to chickens and a figure of 9,000 ducks caught per person per week has been proposed as being typical for the industry. On this basis, the catching of ducks in England and Wales probably accounts for some 30-40 man years of work. This is likely to equate to around 50 full-time catchers.

d) End of lay hens

For end of lay hens, there is a greater incidence of smaller units and sites are often multi-age, which means that only a single house is depopulated at a time. On very small units, catching of birds is often carried out by farm and local staff, whilst medium and large egg production units use specialist catching teams. It follows therefore that the number of people involved in catching end of lay hens will be proportionally higher, but many of these people will be catching birds only on a very occasional basis. The number of birds caught per hour varies according to the housing system and site but the task is less automated than it is in the chicken sector and birds have to be carried out of the house by hand. On the basis of a typical rate of 5,000 hens caught and loaded per hour per team of 8 catchers, the total catching requirement for commercial-scale units is thought to be equivalent to around 150 man years. Given the higher use of non-specialist staff here, our estimate is that there may be around 100 full-time catching staff operating in this sector.

By adding the requirements for the various sectors together, our best estimate is that the total number of full time poultry catching staff is around 550-650, with some additional work being carried out by part-time and temporary workers.

4.0 CATCHING BUSINESSES

4.1 Ownership

As a rule, the catching of poultry is arranged by the recipient of the birds. In the chicken sector, this is often the processor. For end of lay hens, arrangements for catching are normally made by the producer, although this can be arranged by the processor, in which case, the services of a specialist catching team are usually employed.

The following different types of ownership of catching teams have been identified.

Specialist In-house Catching

A number of integrated companies, particularly those in the chicken and duck sectors directly employ their own catching teams, which work only on company-owned and contracted sites. Several of the larger processing companies operate in this way and have a number of different catching teams. Some smaller processors also have their own in-house catchers. In some cases, this may be just a single team.

Specialist Contract Catching

Specialist poultry catching businesses provide catching services to producers and processors on a contract basis. In some cases, the catching business may work exclusively for a particular processor or a certain number of catching teams may be seconded to that processor on a full-time or part-time basis. This approach is used by some larger processors in the chicken, turkey and duck sectors.

Smaller poultry meat processors and egg producers (in respect of end of lay birds) may contract their catching requirements to such companies on a routine basis.

Ad-hoc / Part Time Catchers

Poultry businesses with only small numbers of birds often use their own farm staff to catch birds, possibly also using additional local labour to assist. This approach is commonplace on small, independent egg production units and also on breeding farm sites. In addition, in-house and contract catching teams may use some part-time catchers in addition to those operating on a full-time basis.

4.2 Scale

Larger integrated chicken processors with their own in-house catchers may employ 20 or more full time staff. Smaller-scale processors (chickens or ducks) with in-house catching usually have a minimum of approximately 6.

The majority of catchers however are employed by the specialist poultry catching businesses. The very largest of these employs over 100 full-time catchers but there are several other major players employing up to around 50. Smaller businesses may employ up to around 12 people. The larger catching businesses often work in more than one sector of the poultry industry (e.g. catching turkeys or ducks in addition to chickens).

4.3 Location of Catching Teams and Sectors Served

In-house specialist catching teams are generally located reasonably close to the farms on which they work, as are contract teams that work exclusively for a particular processor. Specialist poultry catching businesses that serve a number of different poultry companies are distributed around the country, but tend to be concentrated in areas that are close to larger numbers of poultry. However, because of tight deadlines and the 'last minute' nature of the business, catchers sometimes have to travel considerable distances to farms.

Whilst the large poultry catching businesses generally cover more than one sector, some try to ensure that their individual catching teams specialise in a particular sector of the poultry industry (e.g. catching chickens or turkeys or end of lay hens). On occasions, it may be necessary for them to work in other sectors, for example catching both broilers and end of lay hens. Examples

have been cited whereby the same team may occasionally catch in different sectors (e.g. turkeys and ducks) on the same day.

For the chicken sector, the larger specialist catching businesses are well distributed geographically. Locations of these companies include the South West of England, the West and East Midlands, East Anglia and the North of England. In total, some eight specialist businesses are thought to account for over 50% of the chicken sector. In-house catching accounts for most of the remainder of this sector although there are also some smaller specialist catching teams.

For end of lay hens, most of the larger producers use specialist companies including those based in the South East, the West and East Midlands (several groups in the Nottinghamshire area) and South Wales. Some of these companies also catch and move point-of-lay pullets from rearing to laying farms.

For turkeys, the tendency is towards using specialist catching companies, rather than in-house catching. Three catching companies, operating in East Anglia, the North and the West Midlands are understood to catch the vast majority of the birds on larger sites.

For ducks, there is comparatively high use of in-house catching teams in several companies although some contract teams are also used.

4.4 Management, Organisation and Supervision of Catchers

Catchers are organised into teams which, in the poultry meat sector typically consist of 4-6 people working together in a single poultry house. Whilst depopulation is taking place, large farms may have more than one catching team on site at a particular time. In large cage egg production units, catching teams may consist of more people because of the need for workers to carry birds by hand to the end of the house for loading onto the lorry.

Each catching team is under the control of one person, who is normally described as the 'Catching Team Leader' or 'Lead Hand'. In total, there are probably around 100 of these covering the whole of the poultry industry.

The catching team leader is usually responsible for driving the catchers to the farm, often in a minibus ('crewbus'), for maintaining standards during the catching process and for ensuring that the work is completed on time. In addition to this, the Catching Team Leader also plays a full part in catching operations.

Specialist catching companies and catchers directly employed by processors may have their own operating procedures in the form of documented Codes of Practice. Typically, these include reference to animal welfare and health and safety as well as biosecurity. In some cases, the work done by the catchers and the procedures in place are also separately monitored by representatives of the processing company.

Where modular transport systems are in use (commonplace amongst larger processors), each catching team has its own driver, who transports the modules by fork-lift truck from the lorry to the inside of the house. Often several members of the catching team are able to drive the fork-lift, so this role is alternated. In such systems, the driver of the lorry is generally not involved in the catching process.

The schedule of farms to be visited is normally set by the processor, on the basis of the requirements of customers, the processing facilities and the farm. Often, the plans are drawn up only hours before catching begins and even then, they are subject to last-minute changes.

4.5 Use of Foreign Workers

Undoubtedly, the number of foreign workers involved in poultry catching operations in England and Wales has increased in recent years. Whilst some are recruited directly from other countries to work as poultry catchers, others

may move into this work from other jobs: the horticultural industry is known to provide a source of workers for poultry catching in some parts of the country.

In spite of these trends, on the basis of our discussions to date it appears that a significant majority of the poultry catchers are British rather than foreign workers. The use of foreign staff appears to be more prevalent in the processing plants than it is in catching operations.

Where foreign workers are used, in some cases a team may consist of catchers of the same (foreign) nationality or background. Whilst some of these people may speak little or no English (even though some may be British citizens), the Catching Team Leader almost always speaks English and sometimes can act as a translator for the catchers.

Workers from the following countries are reported to be involved in poultry catching in England and Wales at present: Russia, Poland, Ukraine, Hungary, Lithuania, Latvia, Croatia, Portugal and South Africa.

4.6 Turnover of Staff

Poultry catching is hard, physical work carried out in a difficult environment and often during the night-time. It is generally considered to be a job for younger men. In parts of the industry, wages paid to catchers are relatively low. Added together, these features may suggest that this is an industry where the turnover of staff is high and there is no doubt that some workers do stay in the industry for only a short time.

However, a number of companies have reported that as well as having experienced catching team leaders, they also have a very loyal and experienced group of catchers. Some have well over 10 years of experience in catching and a few have worked for around 20 years. Many more have worked for over 12 months and are therefore considered at least ‘semi-permanent’. Inevitably, retention of staff is related to the wages being paid. In some integrated companies, the job of the catcher is seen as a ‘step-up’ from jobs in the processing plant and therefore one to aspire to.

4.7 Methods of Payment

Poultry catchers may be paid according to an hourly rate or a rate per thousand birds caught. In some cases, a flat rate payment may be made each week, plus an additional sum per thousand birds caught. Those catchers employed directly by the processor will be paid by the processor; those employed by a specialist catching company will be paid by them for the work they do.

In some cases, the catching team leader will be responsible for engaging and paying any catchers he recruits. It has been suggested that this method could account for as many as 30% of all catchers and will apply in particular to those employed on a temporary, casual basis to cope with peak workloads. Within the terms of reference of this project, we recognise the difficulties of providing direct training to such staff.

It must be emphasised that for large concerns (whether processors or specialist catching companies) the organisation of poultry catching across a large number of sites is a huge logistical task. The difficulties of getting the correct numbers of birds of the required liveweight caught and transported to the processing plant, according to a programme that may have been finalised only hours before must not be under-estimated. Commercial pressures mean that the emphasis is on getting the job done quickly and efficiently.

Paying staff on a piece rate basis acts as an incentive to them to work quickly but the disadvantage is that when they are travelling, they are not being paid (they are only paid for the birds they catch). The same applies to time spent fulfilling biosecurity requirements. In an effort to even-out ‘overhead’ time across all catching teams, the processor or catching company will try to divide the work up as evenly as possible throughout the week.

5.0 CATCHING PRACTICES

5.1 General Procedures

In all sectors of the poultry industry, birds have to be caught and placed into some form of container by hand. Attempts have been made to automate the catching process, but so far these have proved difficult to incorporate into a commercial farm situation.

Whilst the principles are the same irrespective of the type of stock, there are some basic differences in operating procedures between different sectors of the industry as noted below.

5.2 Broiler Catching

This takes place often, although not exclusively, during the night–time. The preference for night-time catching is partly because of the requirements of the processing plant and because transport times tend to be more predictable. However, night-time catching also has some on-farm benefits, in that light levels within the poultry houses can be controlled and the effects of hot weather conditions can be minimised.

Broiler farms normally operate an all-in, all-out stocking policy, so final depopulation of the houses takes place at virtually the same time. Normally, a proportion of the birds is removed from each house prior to final depopulation (the process known as ‘thinning’) so for each crop, catchers will be on the site on more than one occasion.

Larger processors almost exclusively use module systems, consisting of plastic drawers which fit into a steel-framed chest. These are taken off the lorry and into the poultry house. They are carefully placed close to the birds so that the catchers have only a minimal distance to carry them. As catching proceeds, the catchers work progressively from one end of the house to the other. A number of smaller processors use moveable crates which are placed on pallets, as opposed to modules but similar working practices are followed.

5.3 Turkey Catching

The modular systems used by the large processors are broadly similar to those for broilers. Thinning is often carried out in all-year-round production, particularly if the turkeys are destined for oven-ready sales.

In turkey housing systems, it is often not possible to place the modules as close to the birds because of the depth of litter build-up. Typical practice therefore is to place the modules inside the house but close to the service doors and to carefully 'drive' the turkeys forward, before catching them. This, and the much heavier liveweight of turkeys (as noted in section 3.2) adds to the time taken to catch and load turkeys.

Smaller seasonal turkey producers normally carry out their own on-farm processing of the birds, so catching is undertaken by regular farm staff.

5.4 Duck Catching

The larger processors (which account for the vast majority of duck production) use modular systems that are taken into the building. Ducks are normally 'driven' into a smaller pen within the house for ease of catching. They are then gathered together in groups of four and lifted into containers. All-in, all-out stocking policies are normally used, although thinning is often carried out during the production cycle.

5.5 End of Lay Hen Catching (including breeding stock)

Because of the nature of systems for laying hens, modules and crates are kept outside the house and the hens have to be carried by hand to the lorry. Hens are caught either directly from the cage or, in non-cage systems, they may be 'penned' in a part of the house ready for catching. The process is comparatively slow and in larger houses, hens may have to be carried a considerable distance to the lorry.

6.0 BIOSECURITY PROCEDURES AND ASSOCIATED RISKS

6.1 Background

This section of the report summarises the most common biosecurity procedures associated with poultry catchers and the catching process. These have been compiled following discussions with a number of industry representatives, on the basis of the standards currently set, whether in company codes of practice or on a more informal basis. Inevitably, a range of different procedures apply throughout the industry as a whole. We have also sought views on the extent to which these planned procedures are implemented by the catchers on a day-to-day basis. The views obtained have contributed to an assessment of the main biosecurity risks which are associated with catching.

It is important first of all to recognise the difficulties associated with the catching process. Catching is a physically demanding job, where staff often work long and anti-social hours. The constant need to get birds to the factory on time to enable the processing line to run on schedule puts tremendous pressure on catching teams. This pressure can build-up suddenly and unexpectedly when problems such as staff shortage or vehicle or equipment breakdown occur. If a team has to visit more than one site per shift, a delay on the first farm can have a knock-on effect on subsequent arrangements.

In addition to these pressures, the fact that many staff are paid (at least in part) on a piece-rate basis means that there is inevitably a tendency to want to start catching as soon as possible after arriving on site and to leave the site promptly when catching has been completed. Taking time over biosecurity practices is largely seen by catchers as ‘overhead’ to the main job of catching birds – it increases the length of the shift but may not increase an individual’s take-home pay. Whilst the extent to which this may influence the activities of individual catching teams will undoubtedly vary, it is an issue that cannot be ignored when looking at biosecurity risks and how these may be addressed. For processing companies, who are already operating on low margins, anything that increases the cost of catching (e.g. longer shifts to introduce

additional biosecurity procedures) adds to their costs of production and in reality, such increases may have to be absorbed.

The following sets out typical current procedures and the risks associated with the most important biosecurity-related issues in respect of poultry catching.

6.2 Protective Clothing

Current Procedures - Overview

In some cases, catchers are issued with protective clothing by their employers. Where this is the case, the preference is generally for tee-shirt / sweatshirt and trousers, although boiler suits are used by some teams. In some cases, protective clothing incorporates reflective strips for improved visibility during night-time working. Hats are generally not part of the uniform issued.

What is provided to catchers may range from a single set of overalls to a complete 'wardrobe' of clothing (several items) to cope with a range of different conditions. In some cases, catchers are issued with multiple sets of protective clothing. Some catching companies have tried disposable overalls for catchers but these are considered too warm and generally unsuitable for the task. In some cases, the catchers start and end their shift at a depot / factory, where they put on and take off their protective clothing. In a number of cases, employers who issue protective clothing also arrange for it to be laundered on behalf of the catchers.

If protective clothing is not issued, the catchers work in their own clothing. Typically this may consist of tee-shirts / sweat shirt and jeans or jogging bottoms. Some catchers may also wear a hat. The catchers themselves will be responsible for the laundering of used clothing.

Assessment of Risks

The main risk to biosecurity results from clothing being used on more than one site without being laundered. If catchers work in their own clothes, this inevitably occurs if more than one site is visited during a shift. In addition, it

has to be assumed that there will be some re-use of catchers' own clothing on consecutive working days.

Examples have been cited of protective clothing being changed by catchers on arrival at each site, where more than one site is visited during a single shift. To make this practical, the farm site needs to have suitable changing facilities for catchers which many do not have at present.

More commonly, the overalls worn by catchers are changed on a daily basis, but not between sites visited during a single shift. In an attempt to reduce biosecurity risks, processors do try to arrange for catchers to carry out 'thinnings' at the start of the shift, followed by final depopulation later, since this provides greater protection to the birds remaining in houses after thinning.

The laundering of used clothing at home represents a potential health threat, both to catchers and their immediate families in terms of transmission of zoonotic diseases. In addition, wearing 'dirty' clothing off site has implications for the cleanliness of the crewbus (see section 6.5 below).

6.3 Footwear

Current Procedures - Overview

As above, footwear is sometimes provided by the catchers' employer, otherwise catchers wear their own. Farm procedures and the working procedures of catching teams normally require footwear to be cleaned and disinfected on arrival and when leaving the site. We understand that in some cases, footwear is kept on the farm for catchers' use on that site only, but this is a very rare occurrence.

Where employers provide footwear, catchers change into these either at the start of the shift ('off site') or on arrival at the site. Working boots with laces are often worn by catchers, partly for comfort and because they are considered to provide good 'grip'. Often they also have steel toe caps – this is considered important for health and safety reasons, given the close proximity of forklift trucks and modules in some systems.

Some companies do require catchers to wear wellingtons because they are easier to clean and disinfect than boots. A number of different types have been tried, including designs with flat soles which are particularly easy to clean and disinfect (no deep cleats). In some cases, wellingtons have proved unpopular with catchers because they are considered uncomfortable and too hot in summer. Catchers of end of lay hens particularly dislike them because the nature of the systems in which they work requires much more walking. Wellingtons also provide less safety protection to workers than steel toe-cap boots and there is a view that the flat-soled designs do not provide sufficient grip on some surfaces. The use of short (ankle height) wellingtons has been tried and these have been found to be more comfortable than full-length wellingtons.

Some have tried using disposable covers over lace-up boots to overcome the difficulties of cleaning and disinfection but these are not considered sufficiently robust and they increase the risk of slipping and injury.

Catchers using their own footwear may work in safety boots but more frequently in lighter sports shoes (trainers).

Risks

Footwear represents a very high risk of transmission of organisms between sites. The lace-up boots which are most commonly used are recognised as difficult to clean and even more difficult to thoroughly disinfect. Wellingtons are better in this respect but (like boots) the designs used often have deep cleats which, whilst giving good grip for working makes subsequent cleaning more difficult.

The risk of transmission of organisms on footwear will only be minimised if thorough cleaning takes place on completion of catching on each site and then the clean footwear is disinfected. But first of all, this requires time and – whether due to time pressures, oversight, lack of knowledge or disregard of procedures, it is inevitable that failures will occur. The extent to which

intended procedures are followed by catchers may also vary according to the degree of supervision by site staff. Finally, suitable facilities must be available on site, including water, brushes and suitable disinfectant solution. The norm is that these are provided by the farm for the catchers' use but in some cases, facilities may be lacking, available in insufficient quantity or at unsuitable locations, leading again to practical difficulties.

6.4 Personal Protective Equipment (masks and gloves)

Procedures

Some employers stipulate that catchers must wear FP2 or FP3 disposable protective masks. Alternatively (but much less frequently) reusable air-stream helmets / respirators may be used. In the duck sector, where dust levels are generally much lower, FP1 protective masks are considered adequate for catchers. In many other cases, protective masks are made available to catchers and they are worn according to personal preference, unless a subjective assessment suggests high dust levels. In such cases, team leaders may insist that masks are worn by catchers.

Where catchers are given a choice, it is understood that significant numbers prefer not to wear masks, because they are considered hot and uncomfortable to work in.

Gloves are often made available to catchers and used according to personal preference. Generally these are made of cotton or rubber and intended for re-use, although some disposable gloves are also worn.

Risks

In terms of biosecurity, the risks associated with the use of protective equipment relate to its re-use on different sites. This is most likely to be an issue for air-stream helmets and gloves which are designed for longer-term use. Biosecurity risks arise from lack of cleaning of such equipment between sites and we would consider this to be a significant issue in some cases.

Most disposable face masks are unlikely to be used for more than one day, but in some cases, it is likely that they will be worn on different sites visited within a single shift. Effective cleaning of these is not possible, so to prevent risks they should be discarded after working at each site.

In terms of health and safety, the highest risks relate to catchers not wearing face masks whilst working in a dusty environment, or using masks which are inappropriate or ill-fitting, hence reducing their effectiveness.

6.5 Catchers' Crewbus

Procedures

The catching team normally arrives on site in a 'crewbus' although occasionally private cars may be used. The normal procedure, adopted by much of the industry is that the crewbus stops near to the site entrance so that the wheels and wheel arches of the vehicle can be disinfected before it enters the site. The provision of the disinfectant is normally the responsibility of the site although sometimes the crewbus may carry a portable knapsack-type spray container. The process is repeated as the crewbus leaves the site.

The frequency with which the crewbus is cleaned (externally and internally) varies from team to team. Sometimes, it is cleaned daily and this may be the team leader's responsibility at the end of the shift but in other cases, cleaning is carried out only on an irregular basis. The interior of some crewbuses is designed so that it is easily cleanable (e.g. with stainless steel floors) and has storage space at the rear for used boots and clothing. In many cases however, the interior of the vehicles is very difficult to effectively clean because of its design and the materials used.

Risks

Early indications from Food Standards Agency Project B15004 (currently in progress) are that catchers transport vehicles represent a significant risk in terms of transmission of *Campylobacter* and it is likely to be an equally effective means of transferring other organisms. Vehicles which are cleaned

only occasionally and which are difficult to clean internally pose the greatest threat.

Lapses may occur in terms of the use of disinfectant for vehicles entering and leaving the site. There may be a number of reasons for this, including time pressures, lack of availability and the difficulty of locating on-farm facilities (especially during night-time).

The risk to biosecurity is reduced where catchers only wear clean clothes and footwear in the crewbus and change into and out of their working clothes on site. This is sometimes done, but it takes more time and requires suitable changing facilities to be available on site. Conversely, the risk is increased if catchers return to the crewbus wearing their working clothes during short breaks in their shifts. This does occur, but the availability of suitable on-site facilities for rest breaks would reduce this risk.

6.6 Personal Hygiene

Procedures

Where documented procedures are in place, these require catchers to wash their hands for example before eating, drinking or smoking and after handling poultry. Similar procedures would generally be considered an 'unwritten rule' for catchers, even if not formally documented.

Farm sites are expected to provide suitable hand washing facilities for catchers to use. Many sites also have hand sanitiser units at the entrance to each house and catchers are expected to use these on entry and leaving. Sometimes, the crewbus also carries similar units, or hand wipes.

Risks

It is likely that the extent to which personal hygiene procedures are implemented – and are able to be implemented on farm - will vary considerably between catchers. Where best practice is not followed, there will be a considerable risk to biosecurity.

Variations in implementation are likely to exist both between different catching teams and between individuals within a team. Reasons for failures may include catchers' oversight and poor hand washing practices by catchers (i.e. not being thorough enough). Alternatively, difficulties arise because washing or toilet facilities on site are inadequate - for example, too far away, insufficient numbers, no hot water or soap. In some cases, site facilities may be locked up to prevent catchers using them.

6.7 Biosecurity Training to Date

Procedures

Where documented procedures are in place, they often require catchers to be aware of biosecurity risks and to have an understanding of the procedures that need to be followed in order to minimise the transmission of organisms between sites. Specific instruction on biosecurity procedures is normally provided by the team leader, generally in the form of 'on-the-job' training.

Risks

Overall, catchers' awareness and knowledge of biosecurity and worker protection is likely to be limited. As a result, the risks of biosecurity failures are likely to increase.

The level of training provided to catching staff to date has been variable. Whilst 'on-the-job' training is a legitimate and valuable element in any training programme, it relies on the team leader having sufficient knowledge across a wide range of subjects. But it cannot be assumed that all catching team leaders will have the requisite knowledge of biosecurity and worker protection to be able to provide adequate training. Where formal training has been provided for catchers, in several instances it has been reported that emphasis has been on animal welfare, rather than biosecurity or worker protection.

6.8 Conclusions

The evidence from this current review indicates that biosecurity procedures for catchers and the use of personal protective equipment vary substantially

within the industry as a whole. More significantly, the degree of implementation of these procedures is also variable.

It should be recognised that some companies and individual catching teams do appear to combine well thought-out biosecurity procedures with an equally high standard of practical implementation. Almost without exception however, companies recognised that improvements could be made.

In many cases, it appears that the commercial pressure to ‘get the job done’ often takes precedence over the practical application of good biosecurity measures. A lack of available facilities on site, particularly for changing into and out of protective clothing and for handwashing can greatly exacerbate the problem. Furthermore, it has to be recognised that when catchers see evidence of poor biosecurity practices elsewhere on site (e.g. dirty lorries, or modules coming from the factory with visible contamination), it is more difficult to convince them of the need to observe high standards themselves.

All of these issues need to be addressed as part of any future programme aimed at improving standards adopted by catching teams. The challenge is to ensure that robust and practical biosecurity procedures are applied consistently by all catching teams. It should be noted that the same approach needs to be applied to biosecurity for farm staff and associated workers and that catchers should not be considered in isolation.

The possibility of training provision for the catching industry was well received and there appears to be a genuine desire to make improvements. Given that many of the people who work in the catching sector – particularly at team leader level, do so on a full-time basis and can be considered as permanent employees (comparatively low staff turnover), the impact of a well-targeted training initiative could be substantial.

7.0 PROPOSED TRAINING APPROACH

7.1 Outline of Planned Approach

One of the objectives of this review was to seek the views of interested parties on the proposed training approach which forms phase 2 of this project.

In short, it was envisaged that a series of regional meetings (eight proposed) would be held first, aimed at managers and catching team leaders (phase 2a). These were seen as having a major controlling role in the overall operation and therefore they would be instrumental in introducing any changes needed and in ensuring that these were subsequently maintained. The meetings would concentrate on the need for good biosecurity and personal protection and would also facilitate discussion on the best way of delivering the necessary training to individual catchers. In particular, we wished to know whether managers and team leaders thought this should be done 'internally' or by an outside trainer. Where these discussions indicated a preference for the latter, then training for catchers, in the form of shorter, more informal sessions would be carried out as phase 2b.

This planned approach was discussed with a number of individuals and the general feedback is summarised below.

7.2 General Industry Response

There is enthusiasm for the concept of providing training for workers in the catching industry. However, the need for a cautious approach was emphasised, with particular regard to the content of the training sessions. It was stressed that clear, concise messages should be given and that the policies proposed must be both specific and practical. An example of this is the vexed issue of the footwear to be used by catchers.

It was also thought important to emphasise the fact that good biosecurity during catching is a shared responsibility. Emphasis should be placed on the provision of suitable facilities on farms for catchers; for vehicles, modules and

crates to be visibly clean; for factories and employees to arrange schedules which allow time for biosecurity; finally, for the provision of suitable protective clothing. The clear message was that catchers should feel part of a larger industry initiative and not be 'singled out' as the cause of a problem. The difficulties of the job they do should be recognised.

The proposed training format, as outlined above, generated a mixed response. Some poultry processors thought that a meeting, attended by catchers as well as team leaders would allow everyone to hear the same message at the same time. Others proposed bringing their catching team leaders together with other key personnel (including factory and transport managers) for an in-house session led by outside speakers. Larger catching companies generally held the view that several sessions, with perhaps between two and four catching teams at each, would be most effective. These should be held close to the location of the teams. Again, there was only limited enthusiasm for separate training for team leaders.

Since remuneration for catchers does vary around the country, some may fear losing staff, should they mix with another company's catching team leaders in a regional meeting. There is also a logistical issue, since there are comparatively few team leaders in the industry so wherever an event is held, some people would have to travel a long way. Some would-be attendees are actually self employed and so would not be paid for a day spent on training, unless they were able to come to an arrangement with the processor.

7.3 Regional or Company-Specific Training?

From the above, the consensus was in favour of company-specific training, although some did favour a regional approach. Company specific sessions have the advantage for the employer that they are held on their 'home patch' and under their supervision. Downtime (i.e. time spent not catching) would be minimised. It is also likely to permit a more open discussion of specific issues and confidentiality need not be observed.

Companies also asked for training to be made as relevant to their species as possible. Those not dealing with broilers for instance were keen to emphasise that they did not want training with broiler-specific examples. It is likely that different companies will operate with slightly different (although perhaps equally effective) procedures and company-specific training would be able to highlight the benefits and the essential controls associated with the chosen approach.

7.4 Timing of Training Initiative

With one or two exceptions, the general view was that it would be better to delay training until the autumn, rather than begin in the summertime. Amongst the reasons for this were avoidance of the holiday period and the months when hot weather could cause on-farm and logistical difficulties. There was also a feeling that a short delay would enable some companies to address other issues which would affect biosecurity at catching time (see examples of 'joint responsibilities' in section 7.2). In some cases, it should be recognised that expenditure will be needed in order to improve biosecurity procedures e.g. the purchase of suitable footwear, clothing and protective equipment for catchers.

Views on the timing of training during the day were more varied. Those favouring a larger event tended towards a daytime meeting. Others suggested short sessions before or after a shift, keeping the content short with a punchy and succinct message. Whilst it will be necessary to work with the relevant company when planning each session, we may have to accept that some sessions will not be held when the delegates are at their most receptive. Some back-up material may therefore be useful to reinforce the messages given.

7.5 Likely Coverage of Each Sector Through Training

The individuals to whom we have spoken so far have responded favourably to the opportunity for training provision for catchers. Processors with their own catching teams have been willing to make the necessary arrangements to

bring people together, whilst those who use specialist companies have offered to use their influence as customers to encourage their catchers to attend.

Given this support from the companies, it should be possible to cover a very high percentage of the turkey and duck sectors, particularly at team leader level, since there are comparatively few businesses involved.

The initiative has also been welcomed by a number of companies in the chicken sector. With this and (hopefully) the encouragement of the Assured Chicken Production Scheme where appropriate, it should be possible to obtain good coverage here too. Some of the smaller processors who operate in the non-ACP parts of the chicken industry may provide more of a challenge since they generally use contract catchers. However, two of the largest of these companies have indicated an interest in a staff training initiative. Some of the companies that grow chickens for these processors have also offered their assistance.

In the end of lay hen sector, training sessions would be appropriate for the larger, specialist catching companies and here too, we would hope that the BEIC Lion Egg Scheme would be willing to provide encouragement to their subscribers to attend. The greatest difficulty will be in the provision of training for occasional, part-time catchers of end-of-lay hens. In many cases, biosecurity awareness may need to be delivered by means other than formal training sessions.

8.0 TRAINING RECOMMENDATIONS

These recommendations for a training initiative for poultry catchers are made to Defra and the Food Standards Agency for consideration, taking into account the comments from industry as outlined in Section 7.

The stated intention (see Section 7.1) was to hold a series of regional meetings for catching team leaders. Whilst this idea was popular with a few, many were not in favour. It is therefore recommended that this approach should not be adopted.

The preferred approach is to set up 'in-house' sessions, based on a single poultry processor or a specialist catching company. From our discussions so far, we have identified some 12 poultry processors who have in-house catching teams and 20 specialist poultry catching companies. It would be necessary to arrange more than one training session for some of these businesses, given the number of people involved and their geographical location. However, in some cases, the possibility of arranging combined sessions, either for smaller processors operating in the same sector and geographical location or for specialist catching companies who work for the same processor should be investigated further. At this stage, we estimate that some 40-50 separate sessions may be required. In many cases, there is a preference for involving catchers at the same time as catching team leaders. This approach would effectively mean merging phases 2a and 2b, as set out in section 7.1.

To cover the 'full-time' parts of the catching industry as a whole, we propose two different types of 'in-house' events. The 'key biosecurity messages' would be the same, irrespective of the event type and these are highlighted at Appendix 1.

For those requiring a meeting for larger numbers (perhaps 12 or more, involving managers, catching team leaders and often, catchers too), short presentations are proposed from up to three different speakers (including the

Health and Safety Executive), followed by discussion after each one. This type of meeting should run for a maximum of around two hours.

For smaller numbers (fewer than 12), a more informal meeting would be appropriate and if catchers were involved, the session would need to be shorter. This type of training may need to be delivered on the poultry site or at the depot where catchers meet, at the beginning or end of a shift. Facilities may be limited and time short and so it is proposed that in most cases, ADAS would deliver this training alone, using material agreed with others (including the Health and Safety Executive) as appropriate.

Given the number of training approaches possible and the range of different catching procedures, we recommend that a pilot study is carried out initially. The completion of four meetings, covering different sectors of the industry would permit an evaluation of the approach with companies that have indicated enthusiasm to proceed with training as soon as possible.

The following are seen as key criteria for the success of a training initiative:-

- It will be vitally important to hold a detailed discussion with relevant managers some time before a training session is held for each company. This should address the procedures in place at present and any planned changes, the facilities available for catchers and how to resolve issues which are likely to arise.
- Training must be tailored to the appropriate poultry species (broilers, ducks etc.). Whilst the material will not need to be substantially different for different species, this approach will ensure that only the relevant issues are covered.
- The key messages must be kept clear, specific and uncomplicated. Talks should be short and excessive detail on slides should be avoided.
- There needs to be flexibility in terms of start time, duration and content, to ensure good take-up by companies and good staff attendance

Where processors directly employ their own catchers, plans for training courses should be made via the processor. For each independent catching team, a decision must be made on whether to approach them direct or whether to do so through the processor for whom they work. As far as possible, training should be held on company premises or on-farm.

Consideration should be given to ways of providing key messages in written format. Existing Defra and Food Standards Agency publications could be used as a basis for this. Leaflets, posters or small stickers suitable for display in the crewbus may all be useful. As well as providing a reminder to those who have received training, it would be useful for circulation to those who have not. This approach would also be useful in respect of foreign workers who have difficulty understanding English, since the team leader or another worker would often be able to act as an interpreter.

For staff who occasionally catch birds (particularly end of lay hens), emphasis would be better placed on the preparation and distribution of leaflets. Formal training could probably only be justified at farm owner / manager level, possibly as part of a larger meeting or training session.

9.0 ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS AND THANKS

ADAS wish to thank the various companies and individuals who provided input, information and views which assisted the preparation of this review.

APPENDIX 1

OUTLINE OF KEY BIOSECURITY MESSAGES FOR CATCHERS

1 Clean Clothes - *when catchers start and finish on each site*

Key points:-

- Wearing the same clothes on different sites is a major disease-spread risk
- This policy will be difficult to achieve – but it must be addressed
- Where more than one site is visited per shift, there is a need for sites to provide suitable changing facilities
- Use of clothing which is suitable for catchers working in both warm and cold conditions
- Suitable arrangements needed for laundering dirty clothes

2 Clean Footwear – *when catchers start and finish on each site*

Key points:-

- Disease can be brought into poultry houses on catchers' footwear
- Footwear needs to be clean before disinfectant footdips are used
- Compacted litter, dirt etc. must be removed
- Footwear must be safe, comfortable and easily cleanable

3 Clean Hands - *when catchers start and finish on each new site*

Key points:-

- Good hygiene is needed to prevent disease spread and for catchers' own health
- Handwashing must be thorough if it is to be effective
- Suitable handwashing facilities must be supplied on farms
- Use of hand sanitisers (e.g. on farm and in the crewbus)

4 Clean Crewbus

Key points:-

- The crewbus can often transport disease from site to site
- The outside of the crewbus should be disinfected when entering and leaving the site – responsibility for providing this facility must be established
- Catchers must not get into the crewbus in their dirty clothes and footwear (site must provide suitable rest facilities)

5 Safe Working

Key points:-

- Establish what personal protective equipment (PPE) must be worn
- Ensure that all catchers follow the requirements and know how to put on and take off PPE
- Catchers must be aware of any additional requirements that may apply in situations where disease is suspected or confirmed