



THE HUMANE SOCIETY
OF THE UNITED STATES

CRUELTY EXPOSED AT THE NATION'S LARGEST TURKEY HATCHERY

Overview

Each year in the U.S., approximately 250 million turkeys endure [lives filled with frustration and suffering](#). Bred to grow at an unnaturally rapid rate, many birds cannot even walk normally and suffer from chronic health problems, including heart disease and skeletal disorders. These animals often endure agonizing slaughter.

Each animal's suffering begins at birth. To spotlight this aspect of the poultry industry, for eleven days in October 2010, a Humane Society of the United States undercover investigator was employed at Willmar Poultry Company (WPC) in Willmar, Minn., the largest turkey hatchery in the country. WPC produces 600,000 poults (baby turkeys) each week—30 million birds annually—to turkey factory farms throughout the country. Our investigator documented instances of routine cruelty and neglect every day; birds were roughly and carelessly handled by workers, forced into loud machines and tossed down metal chutes, dropped on the floor and injured, abandoned to suffer for hours without any medical treatment, and had portions of their beaks and toes amputated without any painkillers. Along with the injured and sick animals, hundreds of healthy and fully alert “surplus” poults who were not needed for filling orders were ground alive in a large grinding machine at the end of each day. There are no federal laws that offer protection to these baby turkeys.

Significant Findings

The HSUS investigator documented the following routine abuses and cruelty at Willmar Poultry Company:

- **Grinding animals alive daily.** Hundreds of sick, deformed, dying and injured birds—as well as healthy poults who are “leftovers” not needed for buyers' orders—are killed by being thrown into grinding machines.
- **Daily mutilations without pain relief.** Workers cut off the ends of the birds' back toes with scissors, and jam their heads into machines that use hot lasers—with no painkiller—to cause the ends of their beaks to fall off. Conveyor belts and chutes are often covered in blood from the poults' amputated toes by the end of the day.
- **Abandoned birds.** Sick and injured poults are



Workers cut off the ends of thousands of baby turkeys' toes every day.

tossed into plastic bins or left abandoned and suffering on the floor for hours until they're thrown down a chute into the jaws of a grinding machine at the end of the day.

- **Sick and injured animals.** Due to rough handling by workers, getting trapped in the conveyor belts and machinery and/or genetics, birds often suffer from broken and twisted necks, missing and bulging eyes, and bleeding wings and legs. Our investigator also documented what appeared to be a rectal prolapse on one poult who was still alive, where the bleeding rectum was pushed out of the body. Injured and deformed poult are tossed into boxes or on the floor and left to suffer.
- **Stacks of boxes full of poult crashed on the floor.** When stacked too high or unevenly, towers of boxes containing up to 1,000 living birds tip over and crash on the floor, scattering and possibly crushing dozens of the baby turkeys.

A Day in the Life of a Baby Turkey at WPC

Newborn turkeys are hatched on site at the Willmar hatchery and immediately dumped onto the first of several conveyor belts of the day. Carelessly handled by workers, several are dropped on the floor where they wander around, confused and peeping. In this delicate and vulnerable stage of their lives, their bonding instinct is strong, causing the abandoned poult to follow anyone who walks by.



This baby turkey was found kicking and gasping for air after being injured and left for dead in a box.

They are first “sexed” by workers, where they are separated into male (tom) and female (hen) groups on different conveyor belts. All of the hens get the ends of their back toes cut off by workers with scissors and tossed down a large metal chute. Turkeys use their back toes for balance when walking and standing; cutting off these important toes decreases their ability to stand and walk normally. Their amputated toes bleed for several minutes after being severed, covering the chutes and conveyor belts in blood.

All of the baby turkeys are then “debeaked,” meaning they have parts of their beaks amputated with no painkiller. Workers shove their heads into a circular rotating machine, leaving the animals dangling by their necks as the machine spins roughly, jerking their small bodies. A hot laser sears the ends of their beaks as the poult flap their wings and kick their legs, struggling to push away from the hot light. The

machine releases the poult down another chute and tightly packs them into boxes for shipping, 100 poult per box.

The boxes are stacked (10 boxes per stack, 1,000 poult packed total) and pushed into a room where the poult sit in darkness for the rest of the day until shipping trucks arrive. They will then be shipped to factory farms throughout the country.

The conveyor belts often get overcrowded, and dozens of baby turkeys get trapped in and injured by the machinery, spill over and fall onto the floor, or get crushed to death by the weight of the numerous fellow birds standing on top of them. Injured, bleeding, sick and dying poult are usually tossed into boxes or onto the floor, where they are left to suffer for several hours, gasping, kicking, and struggling, without any veterinary treatment or humane euthanasia. At the end of the day, all of these poult, along with the healthy “surplus” poult who are not needed for filling the day’s orders are dumped into a large grinding machine, where they are ground alive.

About Willmar Poultry Company

Founded in 1945 and based in Willmar, Minnesota, Willmar Poultry Company is the largest turkey hatchery in the country, hatching 30 million poults annually and delivering 600,000 poults weekly to customers all across the country. WPC is additionally one of the country's largest turkey breeding operations and also does business as Ag Forte. A Human Resources worker told our investigator that if one buys a whole turkey from a "regular grocery store," there is a 50% chance that she came from Willmar Poultry Company.

About The Humane Society of the United States

Founded in 1954, The Humane Society of the United States is the nation's largest animal protection organization, backed by 11 million Americans. We work to reduce suffering and improve the lives of all animals by advocating for better laws; investigating animal cruelty; encouraging corporations to adopt animal-friendly policies; conducting disaster relief and animal rescue; and providing direct care for thousands of animals at our sanctuaries, emergency shelters, wildlife rehabilitation centers, and mobile veterinary clinics.

On farm animal issues, the HSUS partners with hundreds of food companies, helping them move toward more humane supply chains by working to reform industry practices. The HSUS also encourages consumers to help farm animals by following the "Three Rs": Reducing the amount of meat and eggs they consume, refining the meat and eggs they consume to avoid those produced using the cruelest factory farm practices, and replacing at least some of the animal products they consume with vegetarian foods.