

**THE TRUTH ABOUT  
FREE RANGE,  
SLOW GROWTH,  
CHICKEN**



# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Mary's Chicken (a brand owned by Pitman Family Farms) has been marketed as the "gold standard" for broiler chicken welfare. Photographs of chickens roaming beautiful green pastures with large trees can be seen on the company's website. "Mary's free-range chickens grow naturally with plenty of room to roam in a caring environment on ranches in sunny California," Pitman states on their Mary's Chicken website and in one of their brochures. "Every effort is made to treat our chickens as humanely as possible throughout the production process." (1)

The company is a major supplier to Whole Foods Markets and also sells to Andronico's Community Markets, Mollie Stone's Markets, boutique grocery stores and butchers, and many high-end restaurants. Though the chickens are mostly sold in California, they can also be found in Washington, Oregon, Arizona, Nevada, and Hawaii. (2)

In the U.S., approximately 9 billion chickens are slaughtered each year – more than any other animal. The market for "free-range" and "humanely raised" chickens has been growing quickly. According to Bill Mattos, president of the California Poultry Federation, a trade association, Pitman Family Farms is "one of California's fastest growing poultry companies." (3)

Pitman owns a slaughterhouse in Sanger, CA. Inside, 150,000 birds are killed each day (4), amounting up to 48 million birds each year.

Publicity materials for Mary's Chicken (5) state that all Pitman's broilers, i.e. chickens raised for meat instead of eggs, have:

- Access to the outdoors, which is covered by 25 percent of vegetation and offers some shade.
- No physical mutilation ("alteration" in industry parlance) of any bird, such as debeaking.
- Enough space to flap their wings, dust bathe, and move about.
- Chickens killed using Controlled Atmosphere Stunning, which many say is the most humane way to slaughter birds.

The international animal rights network, Direct Action Everywhere (DxE), conducted a four-month-long investigation into six of Pitman's farms to see if

their claims were true. (Pitman has a sprawling network of barns and facilities across California and employs hundreds of workers.) (6)

Over the course of multiple farm visits the investigators donning biosecurity gear found:

- Chickens packed into filthy, crowded sheds.
- No indication that the birds had any access to the outdoors.
- Birds attacking other birds.
- Birds with injuries, including pecked out eyes.
- Air fouled with heavy particulate matter (dried feces, dust, and feathers) and ammonia fumes.
- Clear evidence of debeaking (a painful procedure where birds have the tips of their beaks burned off).
- Chickens sold to at least two live chicken markets in San Francisco, where apparently no controlled atmosphere stunning is used.

"It was the worst overcrowding I've ever seen," said investigator, DxE co-founder, and former law professor, Wayne Hsiung, who visited several barns.



*Figure 1 The barn was so overcrowded that it was difficult for the investigators to walk around.*

Lead investigator and DxE member, Paul Picklesimer, said he found walking among the flocks nearly impossible: "If I took one step I was going to kill birds."

The chickens were so crowded at all the facilities investigated that numerous smaller chickens appeared to have difficulty getting to the food and water.

One of the effects of over-crowding in chicken barns is a severe degradation of the air quality. Picklesimer noted that some chickens were panting, showing

signs of difficulty breathing the severely polluted air, which also affected the investigators. “Your throat bothered you for two or three days after going into the sheds,” Picklesimer said.

He also indicated that the barns could be smelled from approximately 100 yards away.

## FREE-RANGE CLAIMS

While access to the outdoors is Pitman’s chief claim to humane treatment of its chickens, DxE’s Picklesimer said the investigators searched on all the farms they visited for signs that the birds had managed to go outside. There were none. “We found no feathers or other indications that the birds might be going outside, e.g. fecal matter,” he said.

On a sunny day (an ideal day for the birds to be outside), investigators drove around the area, checking all six farms including the company’s Reedley farm every 2-3 hours. From the hours of 7 am to 7 pm, they never saw birds outside.

DxE investigators also installed two secret cameras outside a Reedley barn. The cameras ran from early morning through dusk, and showed no birds ever stepping outside.

Most of the barns were completely covered so that the chickens could not experience natural sunlight for their entire lives except when they were removed to be taken to slaughter. However, investigators did visit two Pitman farms which had sheds with chicken wire for walls. While the birds there did experience sunlight, there was still evidence of extreme crowding.

## BEAK-TRIMMING

In typical broiler chicken facilities most, if not all, chickens are debeaked, meaning a portion of the bird’s beak is severed with a hot laser. Chickens’ beaks are rich with nerve endings and are highly sensitive. Animal researchers, noting that chicks will refuse to eat for days after the procedure, believe this practice causes pain. Sometimes a beak-trimming will be botched and the chicken will be completely unable to eat and eventually starves to death.

Industry sources say this beak-trimming is done to prevent chickens from pecking each other. (7)

Pitman Farms chickens were debeaked, according to review of DxE’s footage by two veterinary experts, despite the company’s claims that the birds are never altered.



Figure 2 Despite claims by Pitman Farms that they do not debeak their chickens, two veterinary experts confirmed that the birds were altered.

## ONE “STEP 5” FARM?

Pitman Family Farms acknowledges that some of their chickens are kept in better conditions than others. Chickens from one of their facilities, a showcase farm in the San Joaquin Valley which are seen in their website’s photos and videos, are what are called “pasture-raised.” Pasture-raised chicken farming is labor and resource intensive. At Pitman, these birds comprise only a small portion of the chickens sold by the company.

In 2011, the company raised and slaughtered only 1,000 “pasture-raised” birds a week, relative to the millions of birds processed every year. (8) The showcase facility has received a top animal welfare rating from the Global Animal Partnership (GAP), a non-profit animal welfare rating agency that is more than 90% funded by Whole Foods Market. (9) GAP’s top rating is called “Step 5.”

The vast majority of the nearly 100 farms that Pitman either owns or works with are rated Step 3. In a December 2011 article on the GAP website, David Pitman states that the company owns just one Step 5 chicken farm, one Step 5 turkey farm, and one Step 4 farm. (10)

**“The slow-growing birds don’t get the same kind of injuries as the typical broilers, but they experience much more aggression and have to endure miserable lives for much longer.”**

Pitman, as of late, has garnered positive publicity for switching from conventional broiler chickens to a slow-growing breed called the “California Bronze,” at some of its farms. Conventional broilers, which are found at many of the Pitman farms, are bred to grow extremely fast and big. This rapid and highly unnatural growth causes a multitude of health problems for the chickens including broken bones, joint problems, lameness, splayed legs, heart and/or

liver failure, and open sores caused by extensive periods of immobility. The birds are usually slaughtered at 48 days old.

California Bronze chickens grow slower and do not reach slaughter weight until they are three or four months old. Investigators noted that unlike conventional white colored broilers, these reddish-brown birds found in the Pitman sheds were not sedentary. All seemed to be standing and able to

## SOPHIE

Entering one of the barns at Pittman Family Farms’ Reedley, CA location, Direct Action Everywhere (DxE) investigators spotted a tiny hen huddled on the floor. Half the size of the other birds, the little red hen wasn’t standing as they were. She seemed especially vulnerable in the crowded mass of chickens packed in the shed. When she turned her head, investigators could see why she was so subdued – her right eye was badly injured. Her injury had likely made it difficult for her to make her way through the flock to food and water.

The investigators rescued her and got her veterinary care. Carefully lifting her and wrapping her in a blanket, investigator Matt Johnson held the bird close to his body to keep her warm. “When we finally got her back to the car and gave her food and water, she really went for it,” he said.

Not only did the little chicken get sustenance, she got a name – Sophie.

The veterinarian who examined Sophie said that although she was significantly malnourished and her eye injured beyond repair, she would likely survive. Two weeks later, her eye was removed.

For a short time, Sophie was fostered at one rescuer’s house. There, she got to move freely, experience fresh air and sunshine and see greenery for the first time. “She was very curious, wanting to check everything out,” Johnson said. She even got to meet an activist’s cat. “They were curious about each other, touching each other’s noses.”

These days, Sophie lives an active life at an animal sanctuary. Her constant companion is another red chicken, Zeke, who was also rescued from Reedley. “He’s her best friend,” DxE lead investigator, Paul Picklesimer, said. “They like to cuddle in the grass and they follow each other around.”

Despite her sad early experience of humans, Sophie is a friendly chicken, Picklesimer said. “She loves to be held and petted. She even likes to perch on your arm.

“All you have to do is stick your arm out and immediately she’s there,” he continued. “I think it was her first time to get to perch.”

“It’s a wonderful thing to see them bounce back and live just like a normal chicken,” he said.



*Figures 3-4 Sophie before and after she was rescued by DxE investigators.*

move – it was just that there was nowhere for them to move. “It’s hard to say which situation is more cruel,” Hsiung said. “The slow-growing birds don’t get the same kind of injuries as the typical broilers, but they experience much more aggression and have to endure miserable lives for much longer.”

## PITMAN FAMILY FARMS HISTORY

In 2005, Whole Foods contracted Pitman to become a supplier of “free-range” chickens and turkeys – the privately-held company has been expanding ever since. (11) In 2014, they added three new poultry barn structures totaling 75,000 square feet at one of their farms in Madera, CA, allowing the company to raise 200,000 chickens at that single farm. At a farm in Chowchilla, they added four new barns totaling 100,200 square feet, allowing them to raise 375,000 birds there. Additionally, in 2014 the company began developing 110 acres of land purchased in the Hanford Industrial Park in Hanford, CA. The Pitmans have also done major expansion and upgrades at an expense of over \$2 million at their Sanger, CA slaughterhouse. (12) Despite having a scale of production comparable to the largest producers in the world, Pitman still portrays itself as a small family farm. Lost in the expansion frenzy, however, has been the well-being of animals.

## CHICKEN SENTIENCE

According to a February 2014 *Scientific American* article, chickens are a lot smarter than has been believed: “Few people think about the chicken as intelligent, however, in recent years, though, scientists have learned that a bird can be deceptive and cunning, that it possesses communication skills on par with some primates and that it uses sophisticated signals to convey its intentions.” (13)

Researchers at the University of California, Los Angeles, cataloged 24 different chicken calls.



Figure 5 New research has shown that chickens think before they act and have 24 different calls they use to communicate.

Chickens have one specific sound to alert others to a threat from above, such as an approaching eagle, and another for a threat from the ground, such as a fox. They make another sound to indicate they’ve found an insect. (13)

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Chickens have been known to “fake out” their compatriots by warning of a non-existent danger to distract them.

“[Newest research] led to the astonishing revelation: the sounds or movements an individual chicken makes convey specific information and other chickens understand it,” wrote *Scientific American*. “...chickens interpreted the significance of events and responded not by simple reflex but with well-thought-out-actions. Chickens, it seems, think before they act...” (13)

Their feelings go beyond fear, anger, and frustration to include joy, and perhaps, love. If not love, certainly empathy.

English researcher Joanne Edgar did an experiment in 2011 where she subjected chicks to a harmless puff of air which ruffled their feathers. The air didn’t touch the hen. Even so, when the chicks reacted with stress, the mother reacted with that same stress. (13)

(Commercially-raised chickens are born in hatcheries. The chicks never even see their mothers and their mothers never see them.)

“That such a litany of abilities belongs to animals that humans eat by the billions naturally raises questions about how they are treated,” concluded *Scientific American*. (13)

## PUBLIC CONCERN

Studies have shown that Americans love animals – and not just our pets.

A 2015 Gallup Poll (14) showed the vast majority of Americans believe that the welfare of farmed

animals deserves protection, with almost a third claiming animals warrant as much protection as humans. Another recent poll by the Humane Research Council showed that 79% of Americans believe that animals must be protected from “all suffering and harm caused by humans.” Both results are significant increases from prior years.

Despite caring for animals, many Americans continue to eat them. To resolve this tension, many have turned to purchase “humanely raised” animals.

A survey (15) of over 5,900 participants in 2014 showed:

- 94% stated they were very concerned about farm animal welfare.
- 92.6% believe that it’s “very important” to buy humanely raised products.
- 75.7% stated they were willing to pay more for humanely raised meat, dairy and eggs.

The humanely raised label was ranked highest in importance to consumers over organic, natural and antibiotic free.

Consumers have taken comfort in the promises of companies such as Whole Foods and Pitman Family Farms. They have been led to believe in a dichotomy between industrial farms and “humane” farms.

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Recent investigations, however, demonstrate that violent practices are common even on so-called “humane” farms.

## FALSE ADVERTISING

While most people are concerned about animal welfare and many are willing to pay more for products with labels such as “free-range,” there is confusion as to what these claims actually mean. Consumers might assume that the label “free-range,” on the front of a package of chicken meat means that the bird once had the freedom to roam outdoors.

Part of the consumer confusion stems from the fact that the federal government doesn’t have precise definitions for claims such as “pasture-raised,”

“humanely-raised,” or “free-range.” There is virtually no government oversight over the use of these words.



*Figure 6 The terms “pasture-raised,” “humanely-raised,” or “free-range” are not precisely defined nor stringently regulated by the government.*

The Food Safety and Inspection Services (FSIS) of the USDA in one of its guidance documents, “Turkey Raised by the Rules,” states that if poultry producers want to use the label “free-range” or “free-roaming,” the producer must “provide a brief description of the birds’ housing conditions.” That description is supposed to be evaluated to ensure that the birds have “continuous free access to the out-of-doors for over 51 percent of their lives.” The FSIS says that if animals are kept indoors for all of winter they may not be called “free-range.” (16)

However, nothing has been done to ensure FSIS’s guidance is actually implemented. The government does no on-site confirmation that marketers’ claims are true. It only requires that producers provide their own affidavits on the conditions at their farms. In information provided in 2015, the USDA indicated that Mary’s Chicken was allowed to make the claim “free-range,” based on the company’s own statement and by a certification from GAP – no other evidence or inspection was required. (17)

## RECOMMENDATIONS

DxE has conducted investigations over the last three years into numerous farms raising animals for food across the U.S., including many that claim to be “humane.” Time and time again, DxE has found animals trapped in conditions that would horrify

most consumers, particularly those who purchased products with “humane” labels, thinking that the animals were raised in better conditions.

Deceptive practices and lack of regulation have conspired to make a food system that contradicts most Americans’ basic values. Accordingly, DxE is pushing for cities across the nation to join the Compassionate Cities initiative. Modeled after the Cambridge Declaration on Consciousness, the Compassionate Cities initiative asks universities, cities, and nations to acknowledge the consciousness of animals and prohibit deceptive or harmful marketing practices that have allowed the exploitation of animals to flourish. The regulation of animal products has historically been governed by an agency that is, at best, asleep at the wheel and, at worst, part of the industry’s revolving door. Independent agencies, such as local, state, and federal animal welfare commissions, must be empowered to protect animals to ensure the regulatory bodies will have a true incentive to ensure animals and consumers are protected.

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