



The Root of the Problem: How Whole Foods Abandoned Its Promise on Chicken Genetics



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Executive Summary

In 2016, Whole Foods committed to one of the boldest animal welfare improvements in U.S. grocery history: a pledge, with a hard deadline, to stop selling chicken bred for the fast growth behind some of the most extensive suffering in animal agriculture. That pledge has been cast aside.

Whole Foods made its promise as the founder and governing force behind the certification system enforcing it—the Global Animal Partnership (GAP)—not as an outside adopter of another organization’s standard. Breed is the single most important determinant of a chicken’s welfare, and it is the industry’s chokepoint. Welfare variables like space, lighting, and litter are improvements any individual farm can make on its own. But genetics can’t be changed by a single farm. Two breeding companies control it upstream, and their fast-growing breeds are at the foundation of nearly every farm in the poultry industry. So when Whole Foods walked away from the breed requirement, it gave up the only lever with real power to change industrial poultry *as a system*.

The company’s reversal of its pledge was predictable. Amazon acquired the company in 2017, the year after Whole Foods made its pledge, folding a grocer that had built its identity around industry leadership into an online retailer built on tenets of efficiency and price. That context helps explain Whole Foods abandoning its promise, but doesn’t make that failure any less consequential.

“When Whole Foods walked away from the breed requirement, it gave up the only lever with real power to change industrial poultry as a system.”

The 2016 commitment covered more than 600 farms and hundreds of millions of birds, and helped catalyze what later became the Better Chicken Commitment, now signed by more than 200 major food companies.

Then, over the following decade, it unraveled. The original 2024 deadline passed with no breed rule in place. A binding standard wasn’t written into GAP’s certification until 2025, and GAP reversed course entirely in June 2026. GAP’s current standards, Version 4.1, once again allow conventional fast-growing breeds like the Ross 308, Ross 708, and Cobb 500 at the certification system’s Steps 1 through 3, the tiers that make up the vast majority of Whole Foods’ chicken supply. Slower-growing breeds, which were the one component Whole Foods and GAP always described as the only way to truly address the “root” of the welfare problem, now account for almost none of Whole Foods’ chicken.

The health toll taken on fast-growing breeds is well established. These breeds suffer high rates of lameness, skeletal deformities, and other serious health

problems, conditions that genuinely slower-growing genetics substantially reduces. Although the requirements that survived GAP's rewrite (space, enrichment, lighting, litter) can marginally improve the lives of birds, without a better breed standard behind them, they're improvements layered on top of a genetic predisposition to suffering that no amount of better bedding and exposure to daylight can undo. Farm Forward's latest investigation traces this arc, from the original commitment through GAP's rulemaking to the 2026 rollback of its standard, and found that:

- **A decade-old promise has been quietly abandoned.** It was never enforced by its 2024 deadline, and the standard that finally took effect in 2025 was rewritten within a year to exempt the overwhelming majority of Whole Foods' chicken supply.
- **Genetics is the variable that makes the largest difference in welfare.** Welfare science is unambiguous that breed and growth rate (not stocking density, lighting, or enrichment) are the dominant drivers of birds' suffering.
- **Genetics is where industry power is most concentrated.** Unlike space or lighting, which any farm can adjust itself, breed is controlled by a duopoly of breeding companies that supply nearly the entire U.S. and global market. A standard that doesn't touch genetics leaves the industry's real power structure unaddressed, along with its incentive to keep producing birds in the same way.
- **Welfare marketing has dropped the claim that mattered most.** None of Whole Foods' current public welfare claims any longer mention breed, genetics, or growth rate—the specific issue it pledged to address in 2016, and the variable Whole Foods, GAP, and welfare science have all identified as most consequential. Whole Foods continues to market and price its chicken as if that promise remains intact.

1. A Decade-Old Promise

In 2016, Whole Foods made a sweeping commitment: within eight years, all of the chicken sold in its U.S. stores would move away from the fast-growing industrial breeds responsible for widespread suffering in the poultry industry.

A year later, Bloomberg reported that some of Whole Foods' 365-brand chicken was processed at the same plants as lower-priced conventional chicken, with price standing as one of the only clear differences between the two.¹ A companion investigation by Farm Forward in 2026 found that this pattern persists.² Whole Foods continues to source much of its 365-brand chicken from large industrial poultry companies, like Perdue, that supply mainstream retailers selling the same products at a fraction of the price.

When Bloomberg published its investigation, Whole Foods could point to a significant difference still on the horizon: its 2016 commitment to transition all of its chicken supply to slower-growing breeds by 2024. This move was widely recognized as one of the most meaningful animal welfare reforms in the poultry industry,³ and would have given the price difference a genuine welfare basis rather than just a branding one.

To understand why the pledge carried so much weight, it helps to understand the relationship that catalyzed it. Whole Foods didn't merely adopt an outside certifier's standards; it created the organization behind the standard.

In 2008, Whole Foods CEO and co-founder John Mackey challenged the company to build an independent system of welfare standards that could drive the industry forward. Soon after, Whole Foods founded the nonprofit that would become the Global Animal Partnership (GAP).⁴ By 2011, Whole Foods became the first national grocer to use GAP's 5-Step® Rating Program company-wide.⁵ Farm Forward, this report's author, was a founding member of that system, and sat on its board, pushing GAP from the beginning to make genetics its top priority. So when Whole Foods made its 2016 breed pledge, it was committing to rewrite the rules of a system it had built and continued to help govern.

A year after making that pledge, Whole Foods itself changed hands. Amazon completed its acquisition of Whole Foods in August 2017. A grocery retailer that had built its identity, in part, on setting indus-

1 [“That Chicken From Whole Foods Isn’t So Special Anymore,”](#) Bloomberg, August 14, 2017.

2 [“Salmonella Sold at a Premium: The ‘Better Meat’ Behind Whole Foods 365 Chicken,”](#) Farm Forward, October 2026.

3 John Kell, [“Whole Foods Commits to New Chicken Standards,”](#) *Fortune*, March 18, 2016; [“Whole Foods Market, Global Animal Partnership Recognized by Compassion in World Farming,”](#) Whole Foods Market (WFM), June 28, 2016. Note: Unsurprisingly, press releases related to the GAP commitment have since been removed from the company's online newsroom, linked to the Wayback Machine Internet Archive in this and following footnotes where content has been removed.

4 [“In Pursuit of Higher Standards,”](#) The Whole Story (Whole Foods Market's official blog), July 2, 2021; Lisa Held, [“Are Some Animal Welfare Labels ‘Humanewashing’?”](#) Civil Eats, January 19, 2021.

5 [“Whole Foods Market, Global Animal Partnership Recognized by Compassion in World Farming,”](#) WFM.

try-leading supply chain sustainability and animal welfare standards was absorbed into a company built around logistics, efficiency, and price. The pledge did not originate under Amazon's ownership, and the role the acquisition may have played in Whole Foods abandoning the commitment is unclear. But the acquisition marks the moment Whole Foods stopped operating as an independent standard-setter answerable to its own mission, and became one division in a much larger company for which chicken welfare was never a stated priority. None of that was yet visible in March 2016, when the pledge was still just a promise, and, on its face, still a serious one.

The commitment became official on March 17, 2016, when the company announced that it was “pleased to support the enhancement of GAP standards to require all producers to move away from fast-growth breeds of chicken.”⁶ This followed an announcement by GAP that, in order to receive certification for all levels of its 5-Step® Rating Program, **producers would have to raise only slower-growing breeds by 2024, “due to unresolvable welfare issues inherent in fast-growing breeds of chicken.”**⁷ Theo Weening, who was then the global meat buyer for Whole Foods, said of the genetics pledge at the time:

“Since 2011, Whole Foods Market has used Global Animal Partnership’s 5-Step Rating system to provide our customers with standards and information around how the animal was raised for the meat they buy. Supporting this additional commitment to improve chicken welfare is a step forward in continuing to provide our customers with products of the highest quality and flavor.”⁸

Weening was upfront that Whole Foods made its commitment with full awareness that the shift would cost more, since slower-growing breeds eat more feed and take longer to reach market weight.⁹

Whole Foods’ pledge covered more than 600 GAP-rated farms and 277 million chickens. Leah Garces, then-U.S. Director for Compassion in World Farming (CIWF), called it nothing short of historic, “given the sheer number of animals’ lives that will be improved.”¹⁰ Indeed, this wasn’t a niche pledge but one framed at the time as reshaping a notable share of the U.S. broiler industry—roughly 3 percent of the 9 billion chickens raised in the U.S. for meat each year.¹¹ As Anne Malleau, Executive Director of GAP, told CIWF in an interview, “At GAP, our goal is to improve the welfare of farm animals. By addressing the fast growth, we will be **getting to the root of the welfare problem facing chickens today.**”¹²

6 “Whole Foods Market Applauds Global Animal Partnership’s Enhanced Animal Welfare Standard for Chickens,” WFM, March 17, 2016.

7 [Whole Foods Market Applauds Global Animal Partnership](#),” WFM.

8 [Whole Foods Market Applauds Global Animal Partnership](#),” WFM.

9 Andrew deCoriolis, “Whole Foods Made a Big Promise About Chicken Welfare. Ten Years Later, It’s Gone,” Farm Forward, July 14, 2026.

10 “Whole Foods Commits to Better Chicken,” Compassion in World Farming (CIWF), March 2016.

11 Dan Charles, “Why Whole Foods Wants A Slower-Growing Chicken,” NPR: The Salt, March 30, 2016.

12 “Whole Foods Commits to Better Chicken,” CIWF.

Whole Foods' pledge didn't happen in isolation. Other companies had already flagged concern about fast-growing breeds, but Whole Foods and GAP's pledge was the first specific, binding commitment in the U.S. with a real mechanism for change and a deadline.¹³ Three months later, in June 2016, Perdue Farms unveiled its own set of animal-care reforms, with *Fortune* explicitly noting that Perdue's announcement followed on the heels of Whole Foods' pledge to replace all of its fast-growing chicken breeds.¹⁴

By November 2016, a coalition of animal welfare organizations had formalized a version of these same commitments into what would later be named the Better Chicken Commitment (BCC), a standardized pledge covering breed, stocking density, lighting, enrichment, and slaughter method, most notably requiring 1) a transition to slower-growing breeds meeting an independent welfare protocol, and 2) a maximum stocking density of six pounds per square foot.¹⁵ It has since been signed by more than 200 major food companies, including Burger King, Subway, Chipotle, Denny's, Nestlé, and Compass Group.¹⁶ Whole Foods' pledge, in other words, was one of the opening moves in what became the broader industry's most significant welfare commitment to date.

Not everyone welcomed the pledge. As more companies signed onto the BCC, opposition grew from industry-aligned voices, who questioned whether the transition was commercially sustainable, pointing out that slower-growing breeds require more feed over longer grow-out periods while yielding less meat per bird.¹⁷ But Whole Foods had already taken these factors into consideration and judged the transition to be both commercially and ethically worthwhile.

In June 2016, Whole Foods and GAP jointly accepted public credit for this pledge, receiving a Special Recognition Award from Compassion in World Farming.¹⁸ On accepting the award, Weening said: "In March, we made a commitment that by 2024 we'd move all of our meat chicken standards away from the negative impacts that fast growth genetics results in. **We felt this was really the only way to address the animal welfare issues in the meat chicken industry today.**"¹⁹ And Weening told NPR that the slower-growing bird "is a much better, healthier chicken, and at the same time it's a much [more] flavorful chicken as well."²⁰

The new GAP standards required the use of breeds that grow 23 percent slower than conventional breeds; a stocking density of six pounds per square

13 [Whole Foods Commits to Better Chicken](#), CIWF.

14 John Kell, "[Perdue Is Unveiling Major New Reforms to How It Raises Chickens](#)," *Fortune*, June 27, 2016.

15 "[The Better Chicken Commitment](#)," Better Chicken Commitment (BCC), accessed August 13, 2026.

16 "[The Better Chicken Commitment](#)," BCC.

17 Roy Graber, "[5 Steps to Prepare to Meet Better Chicken Commitment](#)," WATTPoultry, January 17, 2022; Asit Sharma, "[Why Whole Foods Is Raising Its Animal Welfare Standards](#)," The Motley Fool, March 21, 2016.

18 "[Whole Foods Market, Global Animal Partnership Recognized by Compassion in World Farming](#)," WFM.

19 "[2016 – The Year of the Chicken](#)," Global Animal Partnership (GAP), December 9, 2016. Note: GAP removed this article from their site; linked instead to the Wayback Machine Internet Archive.

20 Charles, "[Why Whole Foods Wants A Slower-Growing Chicken](#)."

foot, roughly 25 percent more space than conventional birds; and natural light, along with enrichments like straw bales and perches.²¹ This represented a shift away from the industry status quo, in which conventional chickens are typically raised with as little as three-quarters of a square foot of space and no enrichment or natural light at all.²²

Although the GAP standard would have led to modest differences in welfare—worth taking seriously—it’s also worth being precise about what this com-

mitment was, and what it wasn’t. Slower-growing hybrids represent a welfare improvement over the standard Cornish Cross breeds used throughout the industry, but they remain commercial hybrids who were selected primarily for yield and whose health and welfare are still severely compromised when compared with truly slow-growing heritage breeds.²³ Whole Foods did not commit to heritage birds. It committed to a limited, achievable step toward *slower-* but not *slow-*growing genetics.²⁴

21 Kell, “[Whole Foods Commits to New Chicken Standards](#).”

22 Kell, “[Whole Foods Commits to New Chicken Standards](#),” “[2016 – The Year of the Chicken](#),” GAP.

23 deCoriolis, “[Whole Foods Made a Big Promise](#).”

24 Andrew deCoriolis, “[Whole Foods’ ‘Better Chicken’ Isn’t What You Think](#),” Farm Forward, March 29, 2022.

2. GAP: The Mechanism That Was Supposed to Enforce Whole Foods' Promise and How Its Standard Was Gutted

A promise is only as good as the system enforcing it. Whole Foods' 2016 pledge wasn't just a public statement of intent. It was written directly into the rules of a certification body Whole Foods created eight years earlier. Its fate would come down to whether GAP's standard actually required what Whole Foods said it would and whether Whole Foods' own meat department was willing to let that standard stand once it came time to enforce it.

That standard—GAP's 5-Step® Rating Program—didn't emerge in a vacuum. Farm Forward was a founding board member of GAP from its earliest days and helped write the organization's original standards, urging GAP for years to make genetics (not just housing or stocking density) the centerpiece of its welfare agenda.²⁵ The 2016 breed requirement was, in significant part, a direct outcome of that advocacy.

GAP's 5-Step® Rating Program rates farms on a six-level scale, Step 1 through Step 5+, with each step adding requirements on top of the last: at Step 1, no crowding, cages, or crates; Step 2, an enriched environment (e.g., straw bales, perches); Step 3, enhanced outdoor access; Step 4, a pasture-centered environment; Step 5, animal-centered breeding for the outdoors; and Step 5+, an animal's entire life is spent on a single farm.²⁶ See Appendix for full details of requirements for each Step.²⁷

Two structural details are central to understanding what a GAP label actually guarantees. First, GAP does not audit farms or issue certifications; it writes the standards, while independent, authorized third-party certifiers conduct the audits and assign each farm's Step rating. Every certified farm is re-audited at least once every 12 months.²⁸

²⁵ Aaron Gross, "[Why We Resigned from the Board of the Nation's Largest Animal Welfare Certification](#)," Farm Forward, October 2020.

²⁶ I. J. H. Duncan et al., "[Global Animal Partnership's 5-Step™ Animal Welfare Rating Standards: A Welfare-labelling Scheme that Allows for Continuous Improvement](#)," *Animal Welfare* 21, no. S1 (2012): 113-116.

²⁷ "[Chicken Standards & Application](#)," GAP, accessed July 23, 2026.

²⁸ "[5-Step Animal Welfare Standards for Chickens Raised for Meat v4.1](#)," GAP, 2026.

Second, the distribution of farms across those steps matters enormously to this story. More than 4,000 farms participate in the program nationwide, but the overwhelming majority fall within Steps 1 through 3. Very few ever reach Steps 4, 5, or 5+. ²⁹ Farm Forward pushed GAP to require producers to advance above the bottom tiers over time, rather than certifying indefinitely at Steps 1 through 3. GAP's refusal to adopt that kind of continuous improvement was among the reasons Farm Forward cited when it later left the board. That imbalance is exactly why a breed requirement's placement within the Step system matters. A rule that only binds Steps 4 and up affects a small fraction of the supply chain, while a rule that binds Steps 1 through 3 reaches nearly every farm GAP certifies. The same pattern that would later doom the breed requirement was already visible here: whenever a GAP standard threatened to genuinely constrain producers rather than simply describe them, GAP chose the version that left producers' actual practices undisturbed.

The original 2016 pledge, translated into GAP's rules, required every certification tier to transition to higher-welfare genetics by January 1, 2024. ³⁰ Farm Forward and other animal welfare groups took the announcement at the time as a credible reform.

That confidence didn't survive. The January 2024 deadline came and went with no breed requirement in place. It wasn't until Version 4.0 of the GAP stan-

dard, released on January 31, 2025, and effective for all existing certified operations by June 1, 2025, that GAP actually wrote the binding breed requirement. ³¹ But then, the deadline was pushed out even further, as this new version of the standard stated that all Step levels are required to transition to approved slower-growing breeds by June 1, 2030. ³²

GAP has done more than repeatedly state publicly that genetics is the single most important factor affecting welfare; it funded peer-reviewed research to further establish the link. A two-year University of Guelph study of more than 7,500 broiler chickens across 16 genetic strains confirmed that fast growth, paired with high breast-meat yield, drives poor welfare outcomes. ³³ With these findings in hand, GAP was working from evidence that squarely implicated genetics as foundational to the standards it was setting.

But the study's design had a telling omission: it compared only already-fast-growing commercial strains and largely excluded true heritage breeds. Farm Forward encouraged the researchers to include heritage genetics, even providing heritage hatching eggs so they could include them in the study. A few heritage birds *were* included, but not in sufficient numbers to be statistically significant, so their data were dropped from the final comparisons, even though the heritage birds performed noticeably better than even the slower-growing hybrid strains.

²⁹ Anna, "[Animal Welfare](#)," Latis, January 21, 2026.

³⁰ "[Whole Foods Commits to Better Chicken](#)," CIWF.

³¹ "[5-Step Animal Welfare Standards for Chickens Raised for Meat v4.0](#)," GAP, 2025.

³² "[5-Step Animal Welfare Standards for Chickens Raised for Meat v4.0](#)," GAP.

³³ Stephanie Torrey et al., "[In Pursuit of a Better Broiler: Growth, Efficiency, and Mortality of 16 Strains of Broiler Chickens](#)," *Poultry Science* 100, no. 3 (2021): 100955.

That omission meant that the study had no meaningful control group.³⁴ It could measure which fast-growing hybrids suffered somewhat less than others, but the study was never designed to show what a chicken bred for welfare, rather than yield, would actually look like. In effect, GAP's own commissioned science assumed from the outset that a truly slow-growing, higher-welfare bird was off the table—the same assumption its Version 4.1 rewrite would later make official.

Farm Forward's confidence in GAP didn't survive to see the breed requirement be written into the standard. In April 2020, five years before Version 4.0 was issued, Farm Forward resigned from GAP's board after more than a decade of service, stating: "GAP is no longer a tool for change, but is increasingly a marketing scheme functioning to benefit massive corporations."³⁵ Farm Forward warned at the time that weakening the breed standard would carry "spectacular global consequence for billions of animals."³⁶ At the time, the warning may have been read as pessimism from a departing board member. In hindsight, it reads as a forecast.

Version 4.0's breed requirement lasted a little over a year. On June 1, 2026, GAP released Version 4.1, eliminating the slower-growth breed requirement for Steps 1 through 3. GAP cited "rising costs and changing market conditions" as the primary reasons and stated that under the 2025 requirement, "many current producers would like leave the G.A.P. program altogether."³⁷ Under Version 4.1, a slow-growth breed requirement survives only at Steps 4, 5, and 5+, tiers that are rare to nonexistent on Whole Foods' shelves. Because Steps 1 through 3 represent the vast majority of Whole Foods' chicken, by the company's own account,³⁸ the change effectively guts the requirement for nearly all of the company's chicken supply, and for the majority of all farms GAP certifies nationwide.

What GAP rewrote, in the end, was a single line in a standards document: which breeds a farm is allowed to raise. It's a narrow, almost bureaucratic-sounding change. But it's the same line Whole Foods built a decade of marketing and reputation around. Of everything GAP's standard could have loosened, breed is the one requirement that was never just one among many. It was about the animals themselves, before they ever reached a farm or a Whole Foods shelf.

34 Andrew deCoriolis, "[Global Animal Partnership's Breed Study Was Designed to Deceive](#)," Farm Forward, June 30, 2021.

35 Gross, "[Why We Resigned from the Board](#)."

36 Gross, "[Why We Resigned from the Board](#)."

37 "[5-Step Animal Welfare Standards for Chickens Raised for Meat v4.1](#)."

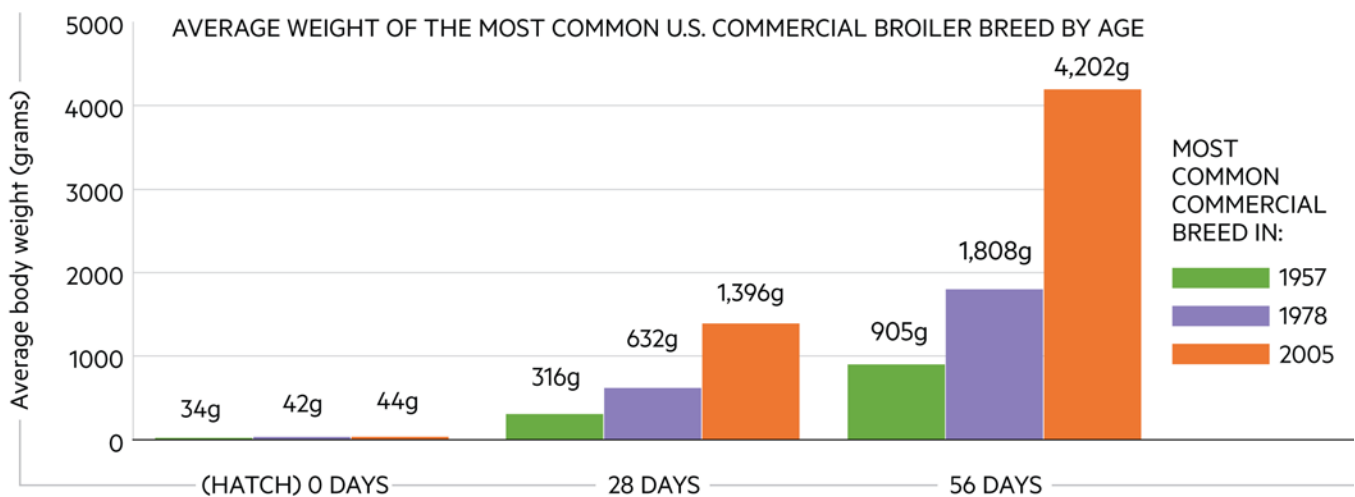
38 "[Statement on Broiler Chicken Welfare](#)," WFM, accessed August 13, 2026.

3. Why Genetics Are the Heart of the Story

Strip away Whole Foods’ 2016 pledge, GAP’s standards, and the price premium Whole Foods still charges, and the story ultimately comes down to a single variable that does not appear on a package: which chicken breed a farm is raising. Space, lighting, and enrichment all matter, but they are secondary to whether a chicken lives a life of manageable discomfort or one of chronic pain.³⁹ GAP itself made this exact argument repeatedly in its own words, when the pledge still stood: **Producers would have to raise only slower-growing breeds by 2024, “due to unresolvable welfare issues inherent in fast-growing breeds of chicken;”⁴⁰ the goal was “getting to the root of the welfare problem facing chickens today;”⁴¹ and it “was really the only way to address the animal welfare issues in the meat chicken industry today.”⁴²**

Selective breeding for growth speed and breast-meat yield since the 1950s has compressed a chicken’s life dramatically. Between 1957 and 2005, growth rates rose by more than 400 percent, a compounding rate of roughly 3.3 percent a year, sustained for nearly half a century (see Figure 1).⁴³

Figure 1. Chicken Breeds Have Been Bred to Grow Nearly 5x Faster Since 1957



Source: M. J. Zuidhof et al., “Growth, Efficiency, and Yield of Commercial Broilers from 1957, 1978, and 2005,” *Poultry Science* 93 (2014): 2970–2982.

39 J. A. J. van der Eijk et al., “Growth Rate, Either through Genetics or Diet, Mainly Determines the Outcome Concerning Broiler Welfare,” *animal* 19, no. 3 (2025): 101431.

40 [Whole Foods Market Applauds Global Animal Partnership](#), WFM.

41 [“Whole Foods Commits to Better Chicken,”](#) CIWF.

42 [“2016 – The Year of the Chicken,”](#) GAP.

43 M. J. Zuidhof et al., “Growth, Efficiency, and Yield of Commercial Broilers from 1957, 1978, and 2005,” *Poultry Science* 93 (2014): 2970–2982.

That pace has slowed since 2005. Comparing the 2005 benchmark to the same breed's current published growth data shows only a 5.8 percent increase over the subsequent 17 years, as breeding companies have shifted some focus toward feed efficiency and robustness rather than speed alone.⁴⁴ Researchers who study broiler welfare caution, however, that this trajectory points in only one direction: so long as growth speed, feed efficiency, and meat yield remain the priorities driving selection, breeding programs are likely to keep making the underlying problem worse.⁴⁵

Conventional breeds like the Ross 308, Ross 708, and Cobb 500 are bred to reach a market weight of roughly 5.7 pounds in about six weeks.⁴⁶ That speed reflects an industry chasing lower feed costs and faster turnover, not a bird's physical capacity or well-being.⁴⁷ Ironically, these same health issues lead to substantial financial losses for the industry, since they drive higher mortality before slaughter,⁴⁸ but the economic benefits still outweigh these losses.

That misalignment between speed and biology shows up first, and most visibly, in the birds' skeletons. Rapid weight gain outpaces leg development,

leading to lameness, bone deformities, twisted legs, and degenerative joint diseases at rates rarely seen in slow-growing breeds. Between 15 percent and 25 percent of fast-growing birds are moderately to severely lame.⁴⁹ Because lame birds spend more time sitting or lying down, they develop additional problems, such as skin lesions exacerbated by contact with other birds and wet, ammonia-soaked litter.⁵⁰ A study of nearly 5 million chickens across 176 commercial flocks found that, by the typical slaughter age of 40 days, more than 27 percent of birds showed impaired locomotion, and 3.3 percent could barely walk at all.⁵¹ Other studies have reported moderate to severe leg impairment at a rate between 5.5 percent and 48.8 percent.⁵² The single most significant risk factor was a flock's genotype and growth rate. The faster a flock was bred to grow, the worse their leg health.

But the strain on chickens' bodies extends beyond their legs and joints. The same rapid growth outpaces the development of the heart and lungs, and a bird's need for oxygen cannot keep up with that oversized muscle mass.⁵³ This produces two of the broiler industry's best-documented and most severe welfare problems: ascites, a condition in which the

- 44 The 2005 figure (4,202 g at day 56) is sourced from M. J. Zuidhof et al., "[Growth, Efficiency, and Yield](#)," the 2022 figure (4,446 g at day 56) is from Aviagen, "[Ross 308 AP Broiler: Performance Objectives 2022](#)." The comparison (a 5.8 percent increase over 17 years) is a calculation from these two sources.
- 45 K. M. Hartcher and H.K. Lum, "[Genetic Selection of Broilers and Welfare Consequences: A Review](#)," *World's Poultry Science Journal* 76, no. 1 (2020), 154–167.
- 46 Aviagen, "[Ross 308 AP Broiler: Performance Objectives 2022](#);" "[Ross 708 Broiler: Performance Objectives 2022](#);" Cobb-Vantress, "[Cobb500 Broiler Performance & Nutrition Supplement \(2022\)](#)."
- 47 C. W. Tallentire et al., "[Breeding for Efficiency in the Broiler Chicken: A Review](#)," *Agronomy for Sustainable Development* 36, no. 4 (2016): 66.
- 48 Hartcher and Lum, "[Genetic Selection of Broilers and Welfare Consequences](#)."
- 49 Torrey et al., "[In Pursuit of a Better Broiler](#)."
- 50 Hartcher and Lum, "[Genetic Selection of Broilers and Welfare Consequences](#)."
- 51 Toby G. Knowles et al., "[Leg Disorders in Broiler Chickens: Prevalence, Risk Factors and Prevention](#)," *PLoS ONE* 3, no. 2 (2008): e1545.
- 52 Hartcher and Lum, "[Genetic Selection of Broilers and Welfare Consequences](#)."
- 53 Anja B. Riber and Kaitlin E. Wurtz, "[Impact of Growth Rate on the Welfare of Broilers](#)" *Animals* 14, no. 22 (2024): 3330.

heart and lungs fail to keep pace with an overgrown body, causing fluid to build up in the abdomen and leaving affected birds severely ill,⁵⁴ and sudden death syndrome, an acute heart-failure event in which a seemingly healthy bird dies without an apparent cause.⁵⁵ Together, sudden death syndrome and ascites account for roughly 5.5 percent to 21.6 percent of mortality in fast-growing birds.⁵⁶ Impaired immune function has also been documented in fast-growing birds, making them more susceptible to a range of additional diseases beyond those directly caused by their growth rate.⁵⁷

None of this can be solved with better housing alone. Researchers comparing the relative influence of genetics, diet, and housing on broiler welfare outcomes consistently find that growth rate, determined primarily by genetics and diet, is the dominant factor shaping welfare, with housing conditions (such as stocking density and enrichment) acting as secondary, contributing variables rather than primary drivers.⁵⁸ Better housing can reduce some downstream harms. But these are marginal improvements layered on top of a genetic predisposition that housing changes cannot reverse. A fast-growing bird raised in

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an enriched barn with slightly lower stocking density is still the same bird, and their suffering is encoded into their genes well before birth.

Even GAP’s standard was modest by international comparison. There is no universal definition of “slow-growing.” France’s Label Rouge program, widely regarded as a genuine welfare benchmark, sets the bar at 26 grams of daily growth, compared to GAP’s own threshold of anything under 50 grams per day (nearly double Label Rouge’s pace).⁵⁹ The Hubbard Redbro, one of the breeds GAP and the BCC approved as “slower-growing,” reflects this gap: a direct farm comparison found better gait scores, longer periods of activity, and better feather cover than a conventional Ross 308, but the same study found only minor differences between the two breeds on other welfare measures.⁶⁰ A separate

54 Isabelle D. Kalmar et al., [“Broiler Ascites Syndrome: Collateral Damage from Efficient Feed to Meat Conversion,”](#) *The Veterinary Journal* 197, no. 2 (2013): 169-174.

55 A. A. Olkowski et al., [“A Study on Pathogenesis of Sudden Death Syndrome in Broiler Chickens,”](#) *Research in Veterinary Science* 85, no. 1 (2008): 131-140.

56 Sudden death syndrome mortality rate is between 0.5 percent and 9.6 percent: [“Sudden Death Syndrome of Broiler Chickens,”](#) *MSD Veterinary Manual*, July 2024; Ascites mortality is estimated at 5 percent to 12 percent: [“An HSUS Report: The Welfare of Animals in the Broiler Chicken Industry,”](#) Humane Society of the United States, accessed July 31, 2026, 2.

57 Christina Swaggerty et al., [“Selection of Broilers with Improved Innate Immune Responsiveness to Reduce On-farm Infection by Foodborne Pathogens,”](#) *Foodborne Pathogens and Disease* 2009 6, no. 7 (2009): 777-783; Angela Zou, [“Accumulation of Genetic Variants Associated with Immunity in the Selective Breeding of Broilers,”](#) *BMC Genetics* 21, no. 1 (2020): 5.

58 van der Eijk et al., [“Growth Rate, Either through Genetics or Diet.”](#)

59 Mary Baxter et al., [“A Comparison of Fast Growing Broiler Chickens with a Slower-Growing Breed Type Reared on Higher Welfare Commercial Farms,”](#) *PLOS One* 16, no. 11 (2021): e0259333.

60 Baxter et al., [“A Comparison of Fast Growing Broiler Chickens.”](#)

study comparing fast-growing commercial lines to a slower-growing breed found real improvements in lameness and mortality, but cautioned that current fast-growing lines may already be somewhat better than the lameness rates reported in older peer-reviewed literature, meaning that even the size of the “improvement” a slower-growing breed offers is a moving, and modest, target.⁶¹ In other words, “slower-growing” is a comparative term, not an absolute one. It describes a breed that may grow less catastrophically fast than a Ross 308 or Cobb 500, not a breed that grows at a pace their bodies were actually built for.

Real alternatives exist, even if they have had limited commercial traction in the U.S. Cooks Venture’s Pioneer line—a three-way cross incorporating heritage Transylvanian Naked Neck breed, a Delaware, and a proprietary line developed from 1930s genetics—was the only non-heritage breed approved by GAP, following its Better Chicken study, with no affiliation to Cobb-Vantress or Aviagen, the two companies that supply roughly 99 percent of the U.S. broiler market.⁶² In GAP’s own evaluation, the Pioneer scored high for animal welfare, activity, bone density, and mobility, and showed low to no rates of the muscle disorders (e.g., woody breast and white striping) that are now common in fast-growing conventional breeds.⁶³ But the company behind it collapsed in November 2023, abruptly shutting down operations and

asking Arkansas state regulators to kill roughly 1.3 million birds it could no longer afford to feed or process; it filed for Chapter 7 bankruptcy the following April, and its assets, including the Pioneer genetics, were sold off for \$7.1 million a month later.⁶⁴ Cooks Venture’s failure says less about the underlying science—the Pioneer’s welfare outcomes were real and independently documented—than about how difficult it remains to build a viable business around genetics the dominant industry has no incentive to adopt at scale.

The genetics themselves didn’t disappear along with the company. The Pioneer line remains commercially available through Metzger Farms, and a related breed is available through independent rancher Bill Niman. That these birds can still be sourced today undercuts any claim that a business built around them is inherently unworkable; Cooks Venture’s collapse was a business failure, not proof that the underlying genetics don’t work. A viable supply chain built on those genetics is still possible. To date, though, no one with enough capital has built one to scale.

This is also what makes genetics different from every other lever in a welfare standard. A farm can unilaterally decide to give birds more space, add a perch, or offer more light. Those changes come with added expense, but they don’t require anyone’s permission. A farm *cannot* unilaterally decide to raise a different

61 Laura M. Dixon, “Slow and Steady Wins the Race: The Behaviour and Welfare of Commercial Faster Growing Broiler Breeds Compared to a Commercial Slower Growing Breed,” *PLOS One* 15, no. 4 (2020): e0231006.

62 “Cooks Venture’s Broiler Breed Scores High in the Global Animal Partnership’s Better Chicken Study,” PR Newswire, December 2, 2021.

63 “Cooks Venture’s Broiler Breed,” PR Newswire.

64 Roy Graber, “Cooks Venture Files for Bankruptcy,” WATTPoultry, April 25, 2024; Graber, “Pitman Family Farms Affiliate Buys Cooks Venture Assets,” WATTPoultry, May 23, 2024; Andrew Mobley, “Arkansas Poultry Company Closure Leaves Farmers High and Dry, 1.3 Million Birds Euthanized,” KAT7, February 14, 2024.

breed if that breed does not exist, or is not sold, or is not available at a commercial scale. Genetics is supplied, not chosen. Cobb-Vantress and Aviagen together account for roughly 99 percent of the U.S. broiler market, meaning the entire industry's biological starting point is set by two companies before a single farmer makes a decision about housing or diet. A standard that only touches space, lighting, and litter leaves that structure completely intact. Only a standard that reaches genetics can put pressure on the handful of companies setting the terms for the whole industry. That's what made the 2016 breed requirement different in kind, not just degree, from everything else in GAP's standard—and from anything else happening in the poultry industry at large—and losing it in Version 4.1 is a retreat from the only requirement that had any structural power.

The Pioneer line and its heritage-breed relatives aren't hypothetical alternatives. They're proof that breeding for welfare, not just yield, is technically possible today—just not the path GAP or Whole Foods chose to require at scale. Research comparing genuinely slow-growing breeds (under 50 grams of daily growth, down to Label Rouge's 26 grams) against both moderate and conventional fast-growing strains found the slowest-growing birds were

healthiest overall—surviving longer, moving more easily, and showing fewer skin and foot injuries than birds of any faster-growing strain.⁶⁵ They also spent more time on behaviors associated with positive welfare, actively using their environment rather than enduring it. Earlier research studying Label Rouge breeds against conventional fast-growing chickens found significant differences in walking behavior and general activity level between the two, consistent with the idea that genuinely slow growth changes not just a bird's health outcomes but their basic capacity to move and behave like a chicken.⁶⁶ Put simply, the welfare gains researchers have documented from slowing growth are not linear or symbolic—they scale with just how slow that growth actually is, and the industry's current “slower-growing” options remain far closer to the fast end of that spectrum than the slow one.

Set against that science, Whole Foods' own language reads differently. The company had real alternatives to point to at various points over the past decade—genuinely slower breeds, and even a commercially viable one bred specifically for this purpose. It didn't need to invent better genetics to keep its promise. It simply chose not to require them.

65 Ann C. Rayner et al., “[Slow-Growing Broilers Are Healthier and Express More Behavioural Indicators of Positive Welfare](#),” *Scientific Reports* 10 (2020): 15151.

66 D. Bizeray et al., “[Early Locomotor Behaviour in Genetic Stocks of Chickens with Different Growth Rates](#),” *Applied Animal Behaviour Science* 68, no. 3 (2000): 231-242.

4. What Whole Foods Says vs. What's Now Permitted

Whole Foods' current public-facing language about its chicken is, on the surface, reassuring. The company's own Statement on Broiler Chicken Welfare states that all chicken sold across its Meat department and in-store Prepared Foods "is certified by the Global Animal Partnership to meet 100+ animal welfare requirements, including a maximum stocking density of 6.0 lbs/ft², providing birds with enriched environments, maintaining well managed litter (bedding) and lighting that is >50 lux either through lights and/or natural lighting."⁶⁷ Its broader Meat Department Quality Standards webpage opens with the line that has anchored the company's meat marketing for years: "Traceability and animal welfare... Because better meat is our commitment to you."⁶⁸

Figure 2 lays out each of these claims next to what GAP v4.1 actually requires in Steps 1 through 3. Read individually, every claim on the left checks out. Read against the standard on the right, and it's clear that every claim that survived is about the birds' environment, while the one claim that didn't survive is about the birds themselves.

"None of Whole Foods' current public welfare claims any longer mention breed, genetics, or growth rate — the specific issue it pledged to address in 2016."

⁶⁷ "Statement on Broiler Chicken Welfare," WFM.

⁶⁸ "Meat Department Quality Standards," WFM, accessed July 23, 2026.

Figure 2. Whole Foods Chicken Marketing Claims (current as of August 2026)

Whole Foods' Public Claim	What GAP v4.1 Requires (Steps 1-3)	The Gap
"Because better meat is our commitment to you."	No specific standard attached. This is umbrella marketing language, not a certifiable requirement.	A values statement with nothing behind it to verify. It's the header the rest of the claims are meant to support, but it makes no commitment against which GAP could hold Whole Foods accountable.
"Traceability:" the claim, paired with "animal welfare," that opens Whole Foods' Meat Department Quality Standards page.	GAP does not require public disclosure of breed, strain, or growth rate at the point of sale. Nor does Whole Foods disclose the farm, hatchery, or slaughter facility that produced a given package of chicken—the most basic facts a "traceability" claim would seem to promise.	The gap here is two layers deep. Even if Whole Foods disclosed where a bird was bred, raised, and slaughtered, that information alone would not reveal the breed or growth rate. But Whole Foods doesn't disclose even that first layer (no farm identifier, no hatchery, no processing facility) at the point of sale. The word "traceability" implies a chain a shopper could actually follow. In practice, no part of that chain is visible to them.
Chicken is "certified by the Global Animal Partnership to meet 100+ animal welfare requirements."	Steps 1-3 farms must meet GAP's baseline requirements, which as of v4.1 no longer include a slow-growth breed mandate.	Technically accurate, but the large number does the marketing work of implying comprehensiveness. It does not disclose that the one requirement GAP itself flagged as most important is not one of the 100+.
Maximum stocking density of 6.0 lbs/ft ² .	Confirmed and unchanged since the 2016 standard.	Accurate and verifiable. But per GAP's own funded research and broader welfare science, stocking density is a secondary variable that affects how birds experience their suffering, not whether their bodies are built to suffer in the first place.
"Providing birds with enriched environments."	Confirmed. Step 2 and above require enrichments such as perches and straw bales.	Accurate and verifiable, with the same limitation: enrichment cannot offset a growth rate the bird's skeleton and cardiovascular system cannot keep up with.
Maintaining well-managed litter.	Confirmed baseline requirement.	Accurate. Reduces contact-related skin lesions but does nothing for the lameness, ascites, or other problems driven by genetics.
Lighting that is ">50 lux."	Confirmed baseline requirement.	Accurate and unchanged. Like the other environmental claims, it's real, but beside the point the 2016 pledge was originally built around.

(No current public claim about breed, genetics, or growth rate)	GAP v4.1 permits conventional fast-growing breeds—Ross 308, Ross 708, Cobb 500—at Steps 1 through 3.	The one requirement Whole Foods pledged in 2016 is absent from both GAP’s Steps 1-3 and Whole Foods’ current marketing. It didn’t survive the rewrite, and it isn’t mentioned in its absence.
Whole Foods “expanded our standards to require third-party certification across the entire Meat department” in 2024, with full certification for all species by the end of 2026.	Certification under GAP’s Steps 1-3 does not include a slow-growth breed requirement, regardless of how many species or product categories the certification requirement now covers.	This is a real, verifiable expansion, but it’s an expansion of coverage (which products carry a certification), not substance (what that certification requires). Requiring more of Whole Foods’ Meat department to be certified under a standard that no longer addresses genetics simply means more products are now certified to the weaker standard, not that any product is meeting a stronger one.

Source: “[Meat Department Quality Standards](#),” WFM, accessed July 23, 2026.

Two things stand out once the claims are laid side by side in this way. First, every claim is independently true. Farm Forward is not accusing Whole Foods of fabricating any of the specific figures in its current welfare commitment. Second, and more revealing, the claims that survived are precisely the ones GAP’s own research identifies as secondary to genetics. Whole Foods has not swapped out an accurate claim for an inaccurate one; it has simply stopped making the one claim that mattered most and continued making the ones that did not require any change to keep making.

Traceability deserves particular scrutiny because it’s the term Whole Foods pairs directly with animal welfare in its own marketing: “Traceability and animal welfare...Because better meat is our commitment to you.” The claim implies a shopper could, in principle, follow the chicken they buy back to the source. In practice, Whole Foods does not disclose

which farm raised a given bird, which hatchery bred the bird, or which facility slaughtered them. This is more basic than breed or growth rate, and it is information the company’s marketing language says it provides. That absence matters on its own terms, independent of the genetics question. A shopper cannot verify *any* welfare claim, GAP-certified or otherwise, about a product whose origin they cannot see. It also compounds the genetics problem. Even a fully documented chain of production would not reveal a bird’s breed or growth rate. “Traceability,” as used here, describes a capability rather than a disclosure. The company could presumably trace a bird’s path to the store shelf if asked, but it does not share that path with the customer purchasing the product.

This is the same asymmetry that runs through the rest of this story, just at a different point in the chain. Shoppers cannot see or choose the genetics behind the chicken they purchase any more than farmers

can, and Whole Foods, like the breeding companies above it, has no obligation to change that. Indeed, Farm Forward tested this directly, requesting information from Whole Foods on the traceability of its chicken to the farms where they were raised. Whole Foods responded that it was not able to provide this information, citing its “Statement on Broiler Chicken Welfare” page on the company website as the only resource available on sourcing,⁶⁹ and which provides no specific farm traceability information.

That silence is not incidental, and the omission of breed is not an oversight. Whole Foods’ 2016 press release, its CIWF-award acceptance remarks, and Theo Weening’s comments to NPR all singled out breed and growth rate as the defining feature of the commitment, and the very thing that made the pledge “historic.” A company that once built its entire marketing narrative around a single, specific, falsifiable claim (that it will “move away from fast-growth breeds of chicken” by 2024) has replaced it with claims that are accurate but unfalsifiable in the sense that mattered: none of them tell a shopper anything about whether the bird they are buying was brought into being to suffer.

⁶⁹ [“Statement on Broiler Chicken Welfare,”](#) WFM, accessed September 15, 2026.

5. A Premium That Doesn't Add Up

When Bloomberg first asked, in 2017, whether Whole Foods' price premium on 365 chicken was justified by anything beyond branding, the company could point to a real answer on the horizon: the 2016 pledge. That answer has now had a decade to prove itself.

Today, that justification has largely disappeared.

Whole Foods still markets and prices its 365-brand chicken as a higher-welfare product relative to conventional chicken sold at mainstream retailers—a framing the preceding sections show is no longer accurate for the overwhelming majority of that chicken. That pricing has not changed to reflect the fact that the specific genetic standard once used to justify it now applies to only a small fraction of Whole Foods' supply.

In August 2026, Farm Forward conducted an audit of 365-brand raw chicken, finding that 92 percent of chicken in our sample was sourced from Perdue processing plants. This chicken was, on average, sold at a 19.6 percent premium on Perdue products from nearby mainstream retailers like Walmart, with as much as a 45.7 percent premium for one product

type and a zero percent premium in other cases (see Farm Forward's companion report, "Salmonella Sold at a Premium: The 'Better Meat' Behind Whole Foods 365 Chicken" for detailed findings).⁷⁰

The price premium sits awkwardly next to GAP's explanation for the rollback. GAP's 2026 announcement cited "rising costs and changing market conditions, along with challenging research around sustainability and climate impacts."⁷¹

GAP's reason for reversing the breed standard is primarily a cost claim, and it's testable. The cost data does not support a premium as large or as erratic as the one Whole Foods charges. Peer-reviewed cost modeling puts the added cost of raising slower-growing birds at roughly 11 to 25 percent per pound above conventional production, depending on the target market weight.⁷² A 2024 analysis commissioned by AVEC, the EU poultry processors' association, found a 21.9 percent increase in cost per bird, or 37.5 percent per kilogram of meat, because it assumed slower-growing birds yield less meat.⁷³ An independent 2025 Wageningen University study of six EU countries found increases of roughly 16 to 19

70 "Salmonella Sold at a Premium: The 'Better Meat' Behind Whole Foods 365 Chicken," Farm Forward, October 2026.

71 "Global Animal Partnership Publishes Updated Poultry Breed Standards to Support Continued Animal Welfare Progress, Farmer Adoption, and Consumer Affordability," GAP, accessed August 11, 2026.

72 Jayson Lusk et al., "The Cost and Market Impacts of Slow-Growth Broilers," *Journal of Agricultural and Resource Economics* 44, no. 3 (2019): 536–550.

73 Jason Gittins, Ryan Douglas, and Toby Townsend, "Costs and Implications of the European Chicken Commitment in the EU," RSK ADAS Ltd for AVEC: The Association of Poultry Processors and Poultry Trade in the EU Countries, March 2024, ii.

percent per kilogram, depending on the stage of the supply chain, and attributed AVEC's higher figure to its yield assumptions and cost-allocation method.⁷⁴ Most of the added cost comes from the breed itself: slower-growing birds eat more feed per pound of muscle, and in AVEC's model higher feed and chick costs make up more than half of the increase. Lower stocking density is the other major cost, adding housing and labor expenses, while enrichment items like straw and perches add almost nothing.⁷⁵ In other words, genetics is not just the most important welfare variable, but also one of the two most expensive to change, alongside space. Litter and enrichment are the inexpensive parts of the pledge to keep.

Against an 11 to 25 percent average cost increase, a 19.6 percent average retail premium does not hold up as a genuine cost pass-through. If anything, it looks too small to cover a real breed change and too erratic to be one. This is not a new pattern. Bloomberg's 2017 investigation found the same dynamic with Whole Foods 365 chicken priced at twice the cost of Perdue's chicken from other suppliers, and in at least one case, 365 drumsticks priced *below* the Perdue-brand equivalent—a detail that undercuts the claim that Whole Foods' pricing tracks production costs at all.⁷⁶ Even under the most generous

production cost increase for slower-growing birds, the math does not add up. A retailer passing through actual production-cost differences on genuinely higher-welfare chicken would be charging closer to 11 to 25 percent more, and consistently so across markets, not swinging from zero to 45.7 percent. And that gap is before accounting for the fact that, for most of what Whole Foods sells today, there is no slower-growing-breed cost to pass through in the first place, which means that essentially none of the 19.6 percent average premium can be explained by the one variable expensive enough to justify it.

Yet Whole Foods has continued charging a substantial premium for chicken on welfare grounds that have since eroded. If shoppers have continued paying more for Whole Foods chicken specifically because of its welfare claims, why was that premium not sufficient to support the slower-growing breeds the company publicly committed to adopting a decade earlier?

Farm Forward's reporting cannot determine how Whole Foods allocated additional revenue from that premium. It can, however, establish that the company continues to charge for a welfare commitment that, for practical purposes, no longer exists.

74 Peter van Horne et al., "[Impact of the European Chicken Commitment \(ECC\) Broiler Production System on Economics, the Environment and Food Safety](#)," Report 2025-138, Wageningen Social & Economic Research, August 2025.

75 Gittins et al., "[Costs and Implications of the European Chicken Commitment in the EU](#)," Table 13, 19; van Horne et al., "[Impact of the European Chicken Commitment](#)," Table 3.1; Luuk S.M. Vissers et al., "[Global Prospects of the Cost-Efficiency of Broiler Welfare in Middle-Segment Production Systems](#)," *Animals* 9, no. 7 (2019): 473; Philip J. Jones et al., "[The Productivity and Financial Impacts of Eight Types of Environmental Enrichment for Broiler Chickens](#)," *Animals* 10, no. 3 (2020): 378. In AVEC's model, feed (+27.8 eurocents) and day-old chicks (+6.0) account for 33.8 of the 60.0-eurocent increase per bird; capital costs and labor add 17.3; litter and enrichments add 0.8. In the Netherlands, Wageningen found housing (+7.4 to +10.9 cents per kg live weight) and labor (+2.7 to +4.4) rose more than feed (+6.8). Holding breed constant, the Jones et al. controlled trial found individual welfare interventions (straw bales, perches, platforms, reduced stocking density, increased feed/water spacing) changed net margin per kg by less than 5 percentage points in every case tested, with one intervention showing a net financial improvement.

76 "[That Chicken From Whole Foods Isn't So Special Anymore](#)," Bloomberg.

6. What Should Change

Whole Foods made a clear commitment, collected a decade of public credit and a premium price for it, and then let the underlying standard collapse for nearly all of its chicken. It made a public pledge in 2016, agreed to a deadline that passed unmet in 2024, committed to a standard finally written into force in 2025 and rewritten in 2026 to gut the standard before it had applied to a single full production cycle. At every point where Whole Foods or GAP could have held the line, they chose not to.

Nor is it a problem that better wording can solve. Whole Foods' current claims are accurate; the standard behind them is simply too weak to matter. Closing that gap requires changes to the certification itself, to what Whole Foods discloses, and to how it prices what it sells—not a rewritten paragraph on a webpage.

What's left is a premium without the promise that used to justify it. The following changes would begin to restore that promise:

- **Whole Foods should commit, independent of GAP's Step system, to sourcing only chicken raised under its slower-growth breed standard** rather than deferring to whatever GAP allows. Because Steps 1-3 cover nearly all of Whole Foods' chicken, GAP's certification alone cannot guarantee this.
- **Certifiers and retailers should treat genetics as the test of whether a standard has any real power at all, not as one variable among several.** A standard that leaves breed unregulated leaves the two breeding companies that supply nearly the entire market to determine the nature of the supply chain.
- **GAP should reinstate the breed requirement it dropped in Version 4.1.** It existed in binding form for less than a year. GAP's own funded research and the wider science support genetics as the dominant welfare variable; its current standard does not reflect that evidence.
- **Whole Foods should disclose, at the point of sale, which breed standard its chicken is currently certified under,** including plainly stating when a product is raised under a standard that no longer includes a slower-growth breed requirement.

- **Whole Foods should make good on its own traceability claim** by disclosing the farm, hatchery, and slaughter facility at the point of sale.
- **Whole Foods should redirect part of its existing price premium to suppliers that do raise slower-growing breeds**, rather than treating the premium as pure profit margin on a welfare claim it no longer backs. **Or, the company should lower its prices to reflect the actual product it is selling.**

In the absence of these actions, Whole Foods should stop implying, through its marketing or its pricing, that its chicken meets a materially higher welfare standard than conventional chicken sold elsewhere. For most of what actually determines a bird's welfare, it no longer does—the chicken sold on Whole Foods' shelf and the chicken at a mainstream retailer like Walmart are, in the ways that matter most, the same bird. A retailer that isn't willing to restore the breed commitment should not keep charging consumers as though it had. At minimum, that means dropping language that trades on the 2016 pledge's legacy, and pricing its chicken to reflect who the bird actually is—a conventional, fast-growing breed available in mainstream retailers for a fraction of the price. Until then, the lesson of Whole Foods' broken promise is not just about one company's chicken. It's about what happens when the one lever capable of disciplining an industry gets quietly dropped from the standard meant to enforce it.

Appendix

GAP's 5-Step™ Animal Welfare Rating Standards, In Its Own Words

STEP 1 — Base Certification	GAP's minimum certification tier. Farms meet 100+ animal welfare standards, including more space to move, no cages or crates, and conditions that allow natural behaviors. Animals are fed a vegetarian diet with no animal by-products.
STEP 2 — Enriched Environment	Animals are given more space than Step 1, plus added enrichments — such as straw bales and perches for chickens, or scratching posts for cattle — to encourage natural behavior.
STEP 3 — Outdoor Access	Animals have a choice between indoor and outdoor living (weather permitting for poultry), with enrichments provided in both settings and shade required outdoors.
STEP 4 — Pasture Raised	Animals live on pasture year-round; in climates where pasture must be protected seasonally, daily outdoor access is still required. Cattle, sheep, goats, and bison cannot be finished in feedlots.
STEP 5 — Animal Centered	Animals live on pasture year-round with protection from the elements. No physical alterations (e.g., castration, tail docking) are permitted.
STEP 5+ — Entire Life on Farm	GAP's top certification tier. All Animal Centered requirements apply, and animals are also slaughtered on-farm or via mobile slaughter unit, so their entire life is spent on the same farm.

Source: "[Certified GAP](#)," GAP, accessed August 3, 2026. Note: Descriptions are paraphrased from GAP's published program overview.