

Poultry FAQ

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What is PCC's standard for chickens and turkeys?

Our standards for chicken and poultry focus on the treatment and health of the animals, to ensure that they are raised humanely, have access to the outdoors, and are not given hormones or antibiotics. You can read our full poultry standard [here](#).

Which certifications help ensure better animal welfare?

PCC supports third-party certifications that have rigorous and transparent standards, routine auditing, and accountability for suppliers who fail to meet their requirements. PCC is a strong advocate for USDA organic certification, because it is the only seal that is backed by federal law and sets strong production standards. However, while organic provides [some assurances concerning animal welfare](#), such as requiring outdoor access for birds, it does have some gaps, both within the standard and through enforcement. Coupling organic certification with additional animal welfare certifications, such as [Animal Welfare Approved](#) from A Greener World or [Certified Humane](#), provides the best assurance of animal and environmental protections.

PCC also supports regenerative farming certifications that require organic as a baseline and then set stricter requirements around treatment of animals, such as [Regenerative Organic Certification](#) from the Rodale Institute and the [Real Organic Project](#) certification.

The certifications noted above are just a few examples of the many that have been developed related to animal treatment and there are resources available online to help consumers sort through all the labels and claims that can be found on meat and animal products. The American Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (ASPCA) has developed a [meat, eggs, and dairy label guide](#) that provides information on common claims and ASPCA-recommended certifications and the Animal Welfare Institute has a [consumer guide that ranks labels and welfare claims](#) from best to worst. Additionally, Consumer Reports has a [Food Label Guide](#) that rates various labels and claims to help consumers identify which ones have little meaning behind them versus those with true guarantees.

Does the USDA organic certification guarantee better animal welfare?

While the organic label does [provide some improvements](#) around the treatment of animals compared to industrial, conventional production, it is not as protective of animal welfare as most consumers would like it to be. It requires outdoor access for animals and prohibits using certain substances like antibiotics and growth hormones that are associated with lower animal welfare. Some of the regulations, however, have been interpreted differently, such as the stipulation for “outdoor access,” resulting in some large producers doing the bare minimum to obtain organic certification. PCC and many others in the organic community have been pushing for better livestock and poultry protections and [advocating for the USDA](#) to implement a set of rules that would strengthen the animal welfare requirements under the organic label.

Is all poultry at PCC certified organic?

PCC sources poultry to provide organic options whenever possible, but we also carry items that are not certified organic in order to meet our shopper's needs. While we are firm supporters of the organic label, we seek out producers who above all else share our commitment to humane animal treatment, land stewardship, and sustainability. This means that even if they are not organic, they are engaging in similar livestock management practices and employing grazing techniques that reduce the climate impact from the animals they raise. Some of our beef suppliers are enrolled in regenerative programs, employing agricultural practices that support soil health, grassland conservation, and carbon sequestration on the land where the cattle roam.

Why aren't there stocking density requirements for poultry under the USDA organic regulations?

While organic certification does offer some important protections for animal welfare and quality of life compared to conventional production, a major criticism of the existing organic rule pertaining to poultry is its lack of clearly defined standards concerning stocking densities, what constitutes meaningful outdoor access, slaughter, and transport. Organic advocacy groups, organic retailers (including PCC), the National Organic Standards Board (NOSB), and many organic producers have worked for years to develop stronger animal welfare regulations for organic. These efforts culminated in the drafting and finalization of the Organic Livestock and Poultry Practices (OLPP) rule, that was published in the Federal Register on January 19, 2017. However, on May 13, 2018, the USDA [reversed course and withdrew the finalized rule](#). Lawsuits from numerous organic advocacy groups ensued. Recent statements from the USDA indicate a willingness to reconsider the withdrawal of the rule.

Why is organic and pastured-raised poultry more expensive than conventional?

Poultry meat from birds raised in more sustainable and ethical environments, like those sold at PCC, reflects the costs of production. Conventional industrial livestock operations can produce less expensive cuts of meat by prioritizing quantity over quality of life and externalizing their costs—the cost of the product at the store might be lower, but the [long term costs](#) are significantly greater in terms of human health, animal welfare, public health (from waste fields that pollute the air and water and overuse of antibiotics that contributes to the development of antibiotic resistance), and greenhouse gas emissions. There are also higher costs associated with third-party certifications, like USDA organic, which are reflected in the cost at the shelf.

How do you ensure products sold meet your animal welfare standards?

PCC has a number of ways in which we ensure our suppliers meet our standards. First, we seek out potential vendors that align with our mission, vision, and values, including other cooperatives and producers that often establish and audit against their own set of strong animal welfare standards. Next, we request that they provide information to us about their production practices by filling out a vendor checklist, which asks about outdoor access, stocking density, feed, antibiotic use, and more. For local vendors, in Washington State or Oregon, we try to arrange visits to tour farms and ranches whenever possible and permissible under public health circumstances. Lastly, we prioritize strong third-party certifications, such as organic, to ensure product claims and integrity.

Is PCC's chicken washed in chlorine?

PCC's suppliers do not use chlorine washes on their chicken. Pitman Farms, the supplier of our PCC private label chicken, uses an organic vinegar solution. However, chlorine washing is a common practice in the US, allowed by

both USDA certified organic poultry regulations and regulations governing conventional poultry. Used after slaughter and before packaging, the intent is to remove contaminants that can cause food-borne illnesses such as salmonella and listeria. Some recent studies do question their effectiveness, among other concerns, but for now they remain the standard practice. One reason our suppliers don't use this practice is because their chickens are air chilled after slaughter, rather than submerged in cold water that would contain chlorinated substances.

What are “low-stress handling practices” that PCC requires in its standard for handling chickens?

In many industrialized operations, the process of corralling and moving birds when they are taken to slaughter can be extremely stressful to birds. PCC requires vendors to make the process less traumatic. While the specifics may differ between producers, some common methods for reducing stress to birds include selecting at night (when broods are calmer), gentle handling and selection, and allowing them to settle in holding crates before transport. Avoided practices include dumping or rolling birds from containers or selecting and catching birds by one leg.

I've read chickens raised for meat grow too fast and big to even move. What is PCC doing to address this issue?

Broiler chickens, those raised for meat, have been bred for increasing efficiency over the past few decades. The faster a bird grows and the more meat that can be obtained from a single bird, the more profit. The unfortunate result for the birds is often poor health, suffering from mobility issues, cardiac issues, broken bones, and more. It has also resulted in lower quality meat. Factory farmed chickens are more likely to produce breast meat that is either tough and pale or has strips of fatty deposits—these two conditions are known as woody breast and white stripping, respectively. One step PCC has taken to address this issue is to work with producers like Pitman Farms who are highly committed to animal welfare and raise slower growing breeds because they are aware of the issues associated with birds that grow too fast. Pitman Farms supplies PCC's Private Label chicken, which is certified organic.

Has PCC signed on to the Better Chicken Commitment?

In 2018, PCC [signed on to the Better Chicken Commitment](#), a collective effort of animal welfare organizations, retailers, and producers, which aims to improve the welfare of broiler hens, or chickens raised for meat, primarily in large scale facilities. Under that commitment, broiler hen producers agree to increase indoor space for birds, provide more enriching or stimulating habitats, integrate slower growing breeds, and employ more humane slaughter methods.

In 2023, after much deliberation, PCC made the decision to shift its scope and level of engagement with the BCC. We originally committed to 100% compliance with BCC in our fresh, frozen, and ready to eat products. Our new commitment, starting in 2024, will be that we offer at least one fully BCC compliant option in our fresh meat department, so long as it meets our other poultry standard requirements. We will also be pausing any tracking and public progress reports related to the BCC.

We have several reasons for making this decision. Unfortunately, PCC's ambitious level of commitment presented many challenges that we did not fully anticipate. Shortly after signing on, PCC had to create an exemption for smaller producers who could not afford the expensive slaughter system required under the BCC. The ready to eat category also presented challenges, especially for tracking and verifying items since many companies who make ready to eat products are not the same companies raising the birds. According to our merchandising team, it is also common for companies who make multi-ingredient, processed items to vary their sourcing based on availability.

The other key reason for PCC's decision is that during the pandemic, deadlines for compliance with the BCC were delayed and then eliminated, putting more work onto retailers to develop their own roadmaps and timelines. It has become less clear which organization is leading the direction and advancement of the BCC. Given that PCC already holds strong standards for the welfare of birds, and the current economic landscape, we have serious concerns about affordability of chickens and chicken-products that comply fully with the BCC and meet PCC's additional standards.

We are still very much committed to improving the welfare of animals, including broiler hens, and our poultry standard already has many requirements outlined under the BCC. It is important to note that when the decision was made to readjust our engagement on the BCC, we had almost 100% compliance in our fresh meat categories for all criteria except the breed component, which was the most challenging piece for producers to address. We will continue to monitor the progress of other companies and chicken suppliers on their commitments to the BCC, and if appropriate, we will reconsider our engagement with this effort in the future.