

**Editor's Note**

*Taking a creative approach to an important issue, Jesse Tyler juggles fact-driven research and personal voice to form a unique argument in "Invasion of the Zombie Chickens." From the beginning of his essay, Tyler draws in his reader with an articulate description not usually associated with research-based essays. Yet Tyler's introduction is not merely an amusing "hook"; instead, it is grounded with a strong, arguable thesis, paving the way for the rest of his essay. Tyler's balance of humor and thorough research provides an entertaining background through which to explore the issue of "spent hens" in Petaluma. Not relying on one fail-safe answer, Tyler explores multiple solutions to Petaluma's growing problem, giving honest evaluations of each. Such a realistic view of the problem adds to Tyler's ethos and provides an effective counterbalance to the concluding description of the "zombie chickens." Ultimately, does his foray into fictional components detract or enhance his argument?*

**Invasion of the Zombie Chickens****Jesse Tyler**

On a cold winter day in 2006, I can remember standing around reading the *Mustang Daily* (Cal Poly's campus newspaper); the wind blew and the pages moved in the same direction. As the paper fell back to a resting position an article titled "Zombie Chickens Hatch Debate Over Older Chickens' Fate" caught my eye. My curiosity drew me in to read more; I was surprised to see the source of the article was from my hometown of Petaluma. Now, my hometown is no stranger to both weird and interesting headlines. Petaluma has had anarchist Jewish chicken farmers, the Poly Klaas murder and was once the egg producing capital of the world, but now with the addition of "zombie chickens" Petaluma's history seems ridiculous. As I read more of the article, visions of a horror movie scene in my hometown were replaced by the realization of what was happening within Petaluma's egg production sector. In order to deal with old laying hens, the farmers employ euthanasia by suffocation. The current way egg farmers are dealing with old laying hens has become ineffective because of the sudden rise of surviving chickens, deemed "zombie chickens." Now is the time to push for an effective, cost efficient, and more ethical way of dealing with spent hens in Petaluma.

The origin of Petaluma's "zombie chickens" can be traced to the collapse of the spent-hen meat market rather than the traditional mysterious virus (Young). Until May of 2006, there was a market for spent-hen meat. Egg farmers were able to ship their spent hens to facilities to be processed into canned soup or canned chicken meat (Young). Now the market has collapsed, and all of the California processing facilities have stopped taking in spent laying hens, instead

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they are opting for meatier chickens which would turn a profit (Young). The closing of the processing facilities' doors to spent hens leaves the egg farms of Petaluma with a dilemma of how to deal with almost a half-million spent hens per year (Young). The answer most egg farmers have turned to is killing off the hens and turning them in to compost ("Zombie Chickens").

The mass-composting of spent hens has become a last resort for the egg farmers of Sonoma County, though the process itself is not entirely known to the general public.

The method currently being employed by egg farmers in Petaluma to start the composting process is the use of suffocation by carbon monoxide. Suffocation has been deemed both practical and humane by companies and health officials (Young). The process of suffocation involves stuffing the hen in to a sealed box and then filling the box with carbon monoxide until the hen passes out and then eventually dies ("Zombie Chickens"). From there, the farmers toss the dead hen into a pile of sawdust to make compost. In some cases of making the compost, a chicken will survive the gassing method and stumble out of the compost pile, thus a "zombie chicken" is born (Young). Having chickens, who are supposed to be dead, suddenly stumble back to life is what has many animal rights groups furious at both the government and the farmers.

The aim of most animal rights groups, such as The Humane Society of the United States, is to try and extend humane slaughtering laws. By the current Humane Slaughtering Laws, poultry is not listed as livestock which requires humane slaughter (Gilliss). Even without government regulation, farmers are doing what they see as moral and humane in order to deal with their spent hen problem. Though the method of gassing a hen with carbon monoxide is supported by animal right groups, there are still many holes in the process. A local egg farmer from Sonoma County stated out of a total of 40,000 chickens he has gassed, two usually survived the process (Young).

When the initial "zombie chicken" debate arose in Petaluma, many of the townspeople rose to the occasion and brought both innovative and common ideas to the table. The most reasonable, and most practical, method of dealing with spent hens would be to turn them into sausages to feed the poor ("Zombie Chickens"). The problem of the sausage solution is the cost of processing the hens into food. Most of the processing plants have already closed their doors to the prospect of making food items from spent hens, and unfortunately, "It's less expensive to go out and buy the bird then process them," said David Goodman, executive director of the Redwood Empire Food Bank in Santa Rosa ("Zombie Chickens"). The problem is in trying to have the factories produce food items again. The cost involved is more than the food banks are willing to pay.

Another interesting idea was to use the hens as reptile food rather than human food ("Zombie Chickens"). Though an ingenious idea, the idea of turn-

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ing hens into food for reptiles wouldn't work in the long run. The main problem in the reptile food case is the demand in the market. Petaluma, and the rest of Sonoma County, is relatively small and reptile food is a fairly specialized area. As a result, the eating habits of the reptiles wouldn't be able to keep up the half million spent hens a year. On average, a snake only eats once or twice in a month due to their slow metabolism and larger reptiles such as komodo dragons don't roam the streets of Petaluma. Yes, the farmers would be able to turn some profit on selling the hens as reptile food, but the simple fact about the reptile food option is: the market wouldn't be large enough to keep the attention of the farmers.

Other than food products, the most interesting and thought-provoking idea that came from the town meeting was the prospect of turning the spent hens into energy. The method proposed originated in Europe and would have to be adapted for Petaluma. The current process being used in Europe is made to turn dead cows into energy ("Zombie Chickens"). The main problem in pursuing the energy idea would be the costs involved. Since the energy method has not been developed to use chickens, Petaluma would have to spend money on the research and development of the process. As well, the city would also have to build a processing plant just to house the operation. All of the construction and research could potentially cost millions of dollars.

Even with the initial costs of the project, there could be many positives if Petaluma goes through with the energy idea. One of the greatest perks of the energy method would be a form of renewable energy, which would help rid Sonoma County of the dependence on oil. As well, cost wise, the energy method would be effective for the egg farmers. The farmers could sell the spent hens to the plant and, in turn, both profit and get rid the spent hens in one shot.

With the energy plan in place, Petaluma and the egg farmers could then concentrate on the humane treatment of the hens before they would be processed into energy. Currently, government regulations do not have any protection for poultry, so the responsibility of setting the standards of how chickens are treated and killed has been placed on to Petaluma's egg farming community (More). Though the current gas method is effective, there is still has a chance of failure. Though the actual chance of a chicken surviving is slim in most cases, the slightest possibility of failure should prompt the farmers to begin looking into alternate ways of killing the spent hens before they are processed for energy or composted. A perfect example is in Marin County, where a more precise method of killing chickens has been put into use by a few chicken farmers (Gilliss).

The current method being used in Marin was developed on small scale chicken farms, but the method could be adapted for Petaluma on a larger scale. The way the small farms are killing their chickens for processing is through bleeding. The chickens are hung upside down in metal cones. Once there, the chicken's jugular vein is cut by hand and then left to bleed out. Within

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seconds the chicken is unconscious due to blood loss and then dies, the entire time the chicken is calm and unaware of what is happening (Gilliss).

On first glance the method of bleeding might seem worse than gassing, but bleeding is actually more humane. The main reason that bleeding is more humane is because of the precision involved. The person prepping the chickens for slaughter takes care where the incision is made on the chicken's neck, in order to cut the jugular vein and thus insure a calm and painless death. The only gruesome scene during the bleeding process is when the chicken is already dead and the body spasms causing the feathers of the chicken to become speckled with blood (Gilliss). From here the now dead hen would be processed in the plant and turned into energy for Petaluma.

Though the word zombie may conjure up images out of a George A. Romero film, the zombies in Petaluma are not a danger to people yet, though it is never too late to be prepared. In *The Zombie Survival Guide*, Max Brooks writes about dealing with a zombie attack on various scales. The equipment Brooks suggests when battling an undead horde can be divided into two categories: weapons and equipment. The bare minimum for both categories includes various ranged weapons, ammo, and melee weapons such as swords, axes, and crowbars. For equipment, Brooks suggests things such as water pumps, gasoline and everything you can think of for camping (Brooks 70-71). The way Brooks sets up the weapons and equipment lists is for a mobile survivor. I don't know about everyone else in Petaluma, but running around with a hundred plus pounds of weapons and equipment is not very alluring to me. The possible rise of the "zombie chicken" overlord is a fact in Petaluma, unless we can organize and set up the energy plant. If the power plant idea is implemented, Petaluma would have cheap energy and the streets would be free of "zombie chickens."

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