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Sharpton Joins With an Animal Rights Group in Calling for a Boycott of KFC

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The Rev. Al Sharpton will not eat at KFC and he doesn't think you should either.

Starting today, Mr. Sharpton is joining forces with the animal rights group People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals to urge a boycott of KFC, which is owned by Yum Brands of Louisville, Ky. Mr. Sharpton and PETA want the fast food chain to require its chicken suppliers to put in place more humane standards for the 750 million chickens they process for KFC every year in the United States. The rap mogul Russell Simmons is also joining the Sharpton campaign.

"If we give our money to KFC, we're paying for a life of misery for some of God's most helpless creatures," says Mr. Sharpton in an eight-minute video that will be shown outside KFC's around the country.

PETA has been waging an animal welfare campaign against KFC for two years. The organization was eager to enlist Mr. Sharpton because KFC has many stores in African-American communities and in late 2003 KFC executives told investors they were making an increased effort to market to African-Americans.

Mr. Sharpton and PETA are demanding that KFC force its chicken suppliers, like Pilgrim's Pride and Perdue, to give chickens more room in factory barns and to initiate a process of putting birds to sleep with nitrogen before killing them. They are also asking KFC to stop its suppliers from forcing such rapid, hormone-driven growth that the birds crumple under their own weight.

PETA said that, unlike other companies, KFC has been largely unresponsive. "KFC has been by far the most stubborn corporation we have attempted to work with," said PETA's president, Ingrid Newkirk, in a written statement.

Yum Brands, which also own Taco Bell and Pizza Hut, declined to comment on PETA's demands and allegations. "PETA is an organization more interested in promoting vegetarianism than the truth," a spokesman, Jonathan Blum, said.

PETA recently won a concession from McDonald's, which said it would study the possibility of requiring American suppliers to use the process of so-called controlled-atmosphere killing.

Several years ago, in response to PETA's "Unhappy Meal" campaign, McDonald's, which buys one of every 20 eggs sold in America, agreed to buy eggs only from farms offering hens extra water, more wing room in their cages and fresh air.

PETA says it has chosen to shed light on the chicken industry in recent years because large chicken producers and sellers have made little movement toward more humane practices. "The chicken industry is way behind the beef and pork industries," said Dr. Temple Grandin, associate professor of Animal Science at Colorado State University and a member of Yum Brands' animal welfare advisory council. "They need to work on getting some of the same auditing systems in place."

Animal welfare specialists like Dr. Grandin agree with PETA that the short lives of chickens need to be improved. Dr. Grandin said that as many as 6 percent of birds suffer broken wings or legs when workers pack them into crates and onto trucks. "A lot of workers aren't adequately trained," said Dr. Mohan Raj, a senior research fellow at the University of Bristol in Britain and a veterinarian who has studied chicken welfare practices in the United States.

Animal rights activists are hardly KFC's only problem. In recent years, the company has been the financial stepchild at Yum Brands. Last year KFC's same-store sales were down 2 percent; sales increased at Taco Bell and Pizza Hut.