

THE NATIONAL PROVISIONER

[Meat and Poultry Industry News](#)[Chicken](#)[Special Reports](#)

State of the Industry 2026: Chicken

The protein moment: why chicken is poised to lead

Chicken positions itself as the affordable protein option as nutrition priorities center on protein intake.

By [Tom Super](#)

October 2026

Call it what you want — a moment, a movement, a mandate. Protein has become the organizing principle of how Americans eat, and chicken is well positioned to lead it.

Start with the numbers. USDA's World Agricultural Supply and Demand Estimates report (Sept. 11, 2026) puts 2026 broiler production at roughly 49.6 billion pounds, up 3.4% over 2025, with growth continuing into 2027. That expansion is happening even as this fall's corn crop — still the second-largest on record at 15.8 billion bushels despite a late-season trim to yield — keeps feed costs manageable relative to history.

For a household budget stretched by inflation-weary shopping and a stated cultural obsession with protein, chicken is doing double duty: it's both the affordable option and the one nutrition science keeps endorsing.

Dietary guidance is catching up to what shoppers already believe

The new 2025-2030 Dietary Guidelines for Americans, released in January, nearly double the recommended protein target to 1.2 to 1.6 grams per kilogram of body weight per day and explicitly steer consumers toward nutrient-dense proteins. That guidance lines up precisely with new Chicken Marketing Summit survey data commissioned by NCC and fielded by Circana in June: 64% of fresh chicken buyers say fresh meat is the best source of protein, up three points from a year ago, and that belief holds strong across every generation from Gen Z to Boomers.

In response to the new dietary guidance, a net 40% say they're now buying more ingredients for scratch cooking and a net 40% say they're buying more fresh chicken. Fresh fruits and vegetables saw the single largest swing in the survey, at a net plus 50%.

The “Ultra-Processed Foods” debate

The same survey shows consumers drawing sharper lines around what counts as “processed.” That distinction matters as federal regulators move to formalize a definition for “Ultra-Processed Foods” (UPFs). NCC has serious concerns about a classification system or definition and we contend that FDA and USDA should bolster existing frameworks and consumer education as science evolves instead of pursuing a classification system that could mislead consumers by implying a food is harmful based solely on how it is made rather than its nutrient content.



Courtesy of SeventyFour / Getty Images

NCC has consistently urged regulators to build nuance into a definition, should they pursue one: a breaded chicken tender delivers high-quality protein, B vitamins, iron and zinc, versus other products whose main ingredient is sugar. How something is processed says little about its nutritional value; content, not processing steps, should be the driving factor.

GLP-1s are rewriting the plate, and chicken benefits

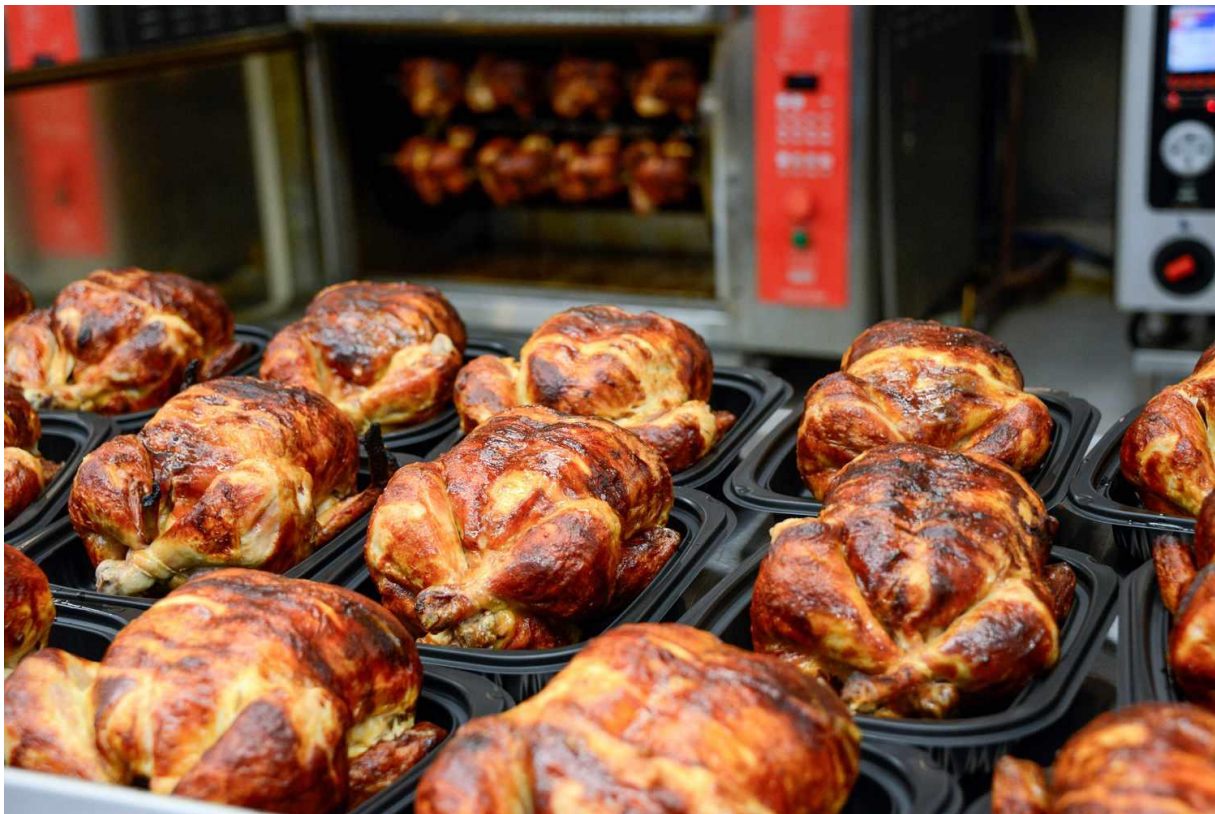
Perhaps the most striking finding in this year's survey: 27% of respondents or a household member have used a GLP-1 medication, up from just 12% two years ago. Among that group, meat consumption is up a net 11 points and poultry consumption up a net 7 points, even

as snacking, alcohol and eating out all decline sharply. Simply put, users are looking for maximum nutrition from less calories. For an industry built on lean, high-protein, portion-flexible product, that's a demand tailwind chicken can own.

Policy is finally catching up to the science, too

Two regulatory fronts NCC has pushed for years are close to the finish line. FSIS's proposed rule to raise maximum poultry line speeds from 140 to 175 birds per minute — bringing the US in line with countries like Canada, the EU, Brazil and Argentina — has cleared public comment with strong industry and worker-safety data behind it; nearly a decade of waiver-plant experience shows a 9.2% drop in *Salmonella* illnesses per million pounds of chicken consumed since the higher speed was first authorized. FSIS estimates finalizing the rule could lower consumer chicken costs while creating jobs in second processing and placing more birds for growers. NCC continues to urge the agency to move quickly to make it final.

Separately, the Hot Rotisserie Chicken Act introduced in Congress — which simply lets SNAP shoppers buy a chicken that's still hot instead of forcing retailers to cool it first — passed the House 384-35 as part of the broader Farm Bill and was adopted again in the Senate Agriculture Committee's own markup this August. The Senate's version of the Farm Bill passed out of committee on September 16 and is awaiting action from the full Senate.



At roughly \$7, a rotisserie chicken is one of the most affordable and complete protein options available in grocery stores and can feed an entire family. For the approximately 42 million Americans who rely on SNAP, removing this arbitrary restriction would expand

access to a nutritious, ready-to-eat meal without adding any new money to the federal budget.

It remains a rare point of bipartisan agreement in an otherwise gridlocked Farm Bill debate, and NCC will keep pushing for final passage.

Convenience remains the constant

None of this works if chicken isn't easy to buy and easy to cook. It still is. Fast prep time remains buyers' top priority (62%), 60% purchase groceries online or via app at least monthly, and over half of chicken buyers now use AI tools for recipes and meal inspiration — up sharply from 28% just a year ago, led by Gen Z at 65%.

Put it together: steady supply, affordability, new dietary guidance and a MAHA-driven regulatory agenda both pointing toward lean protein, a GLP-1 population eating more chicken and less of nearly everything else, and two long-sought regulatory and legislative wins within reach. The “protein moment” that food media likes to write about is, for chicken, genuinely a movement — and the industry is in the driver's seat to lead it.

Tom Super is Senior Vice President of Communications at the National Chicken Council