

Why Canadians are paying more for chicken at the checkout lane

KATE HELMORE > AGRICULTURE AND FOOD POLICY REPORTER

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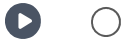
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Chickens at a farm in Abbotsford, B.C. in December, 2021. The wholesale price of some chicken products has increased by approximately 12 per cent since mid-May, 2025.

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Canadian chicken production is failing to keep up with demand as a protein craze and the high cost of beef drive consumers to poultry, hiking retail and wholesale prices.

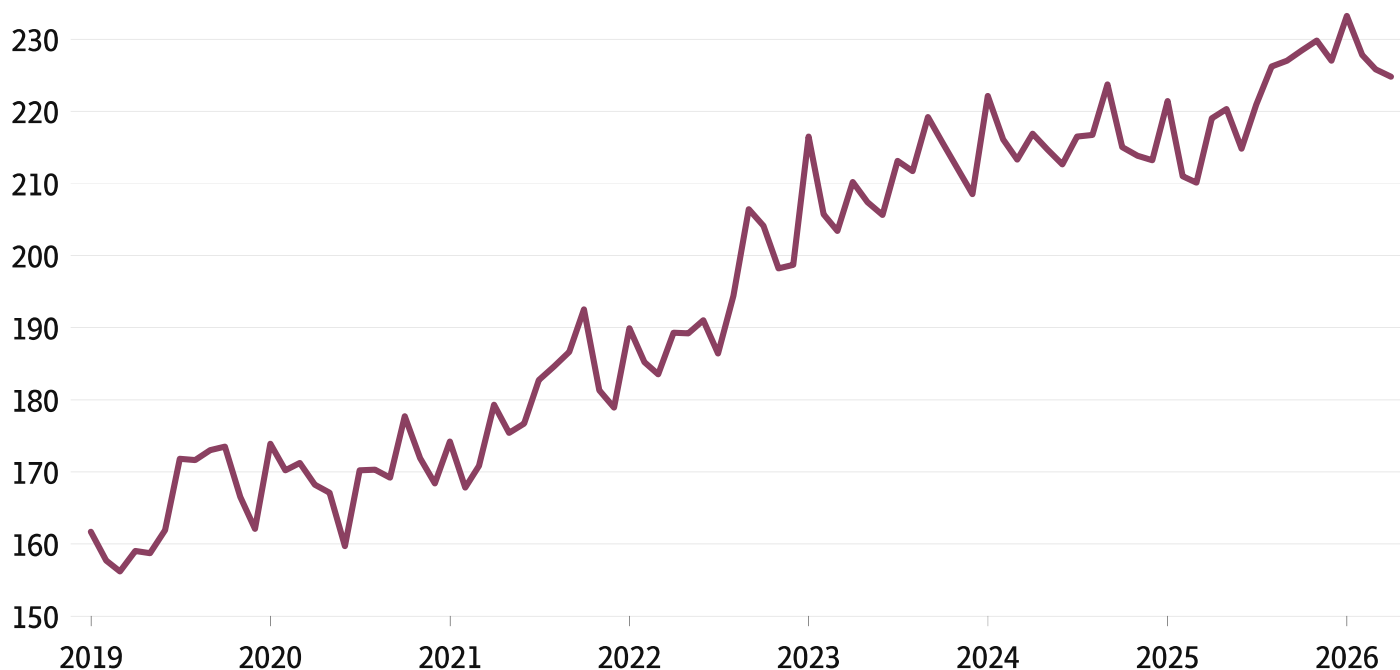
Since mid-May, 2025, the wholesale price of some chicken products has increased by approximately 12 per cent. In April, the consumer price for fresh or frozen chicken rose 2.6 per cent, year-over-year. It was the first time since September, 2025, that annual price hikes dipped below 5 per cent.

Consumers now face high prices for two out of three staple proteins. Given insatiable demand and issues with the poultry supply chain, there's no indication prices will drop soon.

“It’s the exact opposite of what you learned in Grade 11 economics,” said Kevin Grier, a market analyst and economic researcher specializing in livestock, meat, poultry and the grocery sector. “We’re just seeing more and more production, and higher and higher prices.”

Consumer Price Index for fresh or frozen chicken

Index, 2002 = 100



Note: Not seasonally adjusted.

THE GLOBE AND MAIL, SOURCE: STATISTICS CANADA

In agriculture, the “protein trifecta” refers to the three most popular meats: chicken, beef and pork. Should the price for one change, it typically affects consumer demand for the other two.

Currently, Canadian consumers face high prices for beef. Back-to-back years of drought and high production costs in the beef sector drove the North American cattle herd to all-time lows. Farmers couldn’t afford to keep their breeding stock – that is, mother cows – so they sold them for meat, meaning they could not breed more calves for slaughter.

Canadian ranchers fear losing business to cheap South American beef if Mercosur trade deal is signed

As a result, prices have climbed 23 per cent above the five-year average, with ground beef climbing by 19 per cent. These prices are also unlikely to correct any time soon, Mr. Grier said. The cattle cycle is a 150-year-old phenomenon that typically takes 10 to 15 years to run its course.

In the meantime, consumers have responded by switching to chicken, said Graeme Crosbie, a senior economist at Farm Credit Canada who analyzes trends in the dairy and poultry sectors.

Historically, ground beef was cheaper than chicken, but since mid-2024 the price has caught up and at times surpassed the going rate for chicken breasts, according to FCC reports.

Sweeping consumer appetite for protein has also heightened demand for chicken, Mr. Crosbie said. “Protein in all forms is really in right now. It’s having its time in the sun.”

And chicken farmers have struggled to respond quickly enough.



Workers process chickens in Fremont, Nebraska in December, 2019. Imports of poultry are controlled under supply management.

NATI HARNIK/THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

Poultry farming in Canada is a supply managed sector. Nationwide production of broiler chickens slaughtered for meat is set at a fixed level, determined by a national marketing board every eight weeks.

Supply management – which also applies to dairy and eggs – is intended to make sure production matches demand and prices surpass production costs. It is touted as a way to keep farmers in business.

Chicken Farmers of Canada, the organization that sets national production limits for chicken, has raised the quota substantially over the past year to meet increasing demand. From September to November, the marketing board set the quota 8 per cent above the base rate, the highest allocation in its history, according to its 2025 annual report.

But farmers have been unable to meet the higher threshold, said Tim Klomp maker, the organization's chair and a farmer of broiler chickens in Norwood, Ont.

This is because of challenges affecting the first stage of chicken production and involving avian influenza, a disease that took off in 2021.

Chicken production begins with the laying hen. These breeding hens produce fertilized eggs that are delivered to hatcheries, from which chicks are sent to be grown and fattened at a final destination.

Opinion: Chicken prices could soon rise 25%, and supply management isn't helping

Avian influenza did not have a substantial impact on broiler chickens, Mr. Klomp maker said, but laying hens were a different story. Their longer lifespan makes them more susceptible to disease. A shortage of these hens has resulted in a shortage of fertilized eggs and chicks across North America, especially in the United States, which supplies around 20 per cent of Canada's fertilized eggs.

Some farmers across the country have therefore not received their full orders of chicks.

“They still do their best to get their volumes of product out, but at times it’s challenging just because we’re short on those hatching eggs,” Mr. Klompmaker said.

An influx of chicken imports from Chile also indirectly contributed to the shortage, Mr. Crosbie said.

Imports of poultry are controlled under supply management, but a small amount of chicken may enter the Canadian market without facing high tariffs. These imports come from countries where Canada has negotiated free-trade agreements; the largest share is from the U.S. under the United States-Mexico-Canada Agreement.

Members of the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership are also permitted to export chicken to Canada, but most have not taken advantage of this market access. That changed in 2023 when Chile entered the CPTPP. Now it almost single-handedly fills the entire quota allotted under the agreement, Mr. Crosbie said.

Chicken Farmers of Canada responded to the influx of Chilean chicken by holding domestic production steady. CFC didn’t increase the quota until mid-2025.

It meant the sector was lagging coming into what became a period of strong demand, Mr. Grier said, adding that this has contributed to higher prices, which he predicted are unlikely to correct any time soon.

They will come down from 2026 highs, he said. But as long as consumer demand remains strong and beef prices high, it’ll be a long time before Canadian shoppers return to the days of grocery-store flyers advertising \$3.99 chicken breast.

“Nobody should expect lower chicken prices,” Mr. Grier said. “Period.”

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