



Livestock Knowledge Transfer

a **DEFRA** initiative

operated by ADAS/IGER/University of Bristol

LAYING HENS BEAKS: TO TRIM OR NOT TO TRIM?

The operation termed beak trimming is also variously described as beak tipping, debeaking, beak mutilation or partial beak amputation. It is known to cause immediate and subsequent pain although the latter appears to be less severe when the operation is performed on young chicks. It is currently allowed in the UK without anaesthetic provided not more than one third of the beak is removed. Neither welfare groups nor the poultry industry wish to continue beak trimming; the problem is that in several egg production systems, especially extensive ones, the risk of severe welfare problems such as injurious pecking and cannibalism is much greater in non-trimmed hens.

CODES AND STANDARDS

Producers should comply with the requirements of the welfare legislation protecting laying hens (The Welfare of Farmed Animals (England) Regulations 2000) and the Welfare Code for Domestic Fowl. These will be replaced in January 2002 by the domestic regulations implementing Directive 99/74/EC and a new welfare code for laying hens.

- DEFRA (formerly MAFF) Welfare Code for Domestic Fowls recommends that beak trimming should only be carried out as a last resort
- FAWC stated “We consider that beak trimming is a most undesirable mutilation which should be avoided if at all possible and only used to prevent worse welfare problems of injurious feather pecking and cannibalism”. They recommend that, if beak trimming is necessary, it should only be carried out at under 10 days of age
- UKROFS standards for organic laying hens require that “..trimming of beaks must not be carried out systematically ..”
- Freedom Food Ltd state “The practice of beak tipping is contrary to the principles of the RSPCA’s welfare standards. However, at the present time it is accepted that in colony housing systems there is a risk of outbreaks of cannibalism. The pain and suffering of the hens that are being pecked to death is appalling and may quickly affect a considerable proportion of the flock. The need for beak tipping is being constantly reassessed and producers will be required to phase out beak tipping as soon as the causes and ways of preventing cannibalism have been identified”

In some countries, like Sweden, beak trimming is banned but their experience shows that it is very difficult to manage hens in alternative systems without the occurrence cannibalism and high mortality.

OPTIONS FOR TACKLING THE ISSUE

The 2001 DEFRA consultation exercise on the welfare of laying hens sought comments on three options for tackling the issue within pending UK regulations:-

- banning beak trimming in all systems
- permitting beak trimming in non-cage systems only, provided it is carried out by qualified staff on chickens that are less than 10 days old
- allowing beak trimming for all laying hens, but with a time limit for birds destined for cage systems, thereby giving breeding companies an opportunity to reintroduce less aggressive strains of birds destined for these systems, and thus removing the need for beak trimming

A decision will be made shortly on the extent to which beak trimming will be permitted, if it all, following the consultation exercise.

If beak trimming is to be phased out, or avoided on a routine basis, management techniques to minimise feather pecking leading to cannibalism will assume great importance.

GUIDELINES TO MINIMISE FEATHER PECKING AND CANNIBALISM

- Rear in the same system, transfer pullets well before point of lay and keep them in the same groups as during rearing
- Control light intensity carefully using dimmers, lampshades, painted lamps etc. Carefully position lamps to provide even light without bright spots. Provide shade outside in extensive systems
- Control group size i.e. keep it as small as possible in the pens of alternative systems, 4/5 in conventional cages and 8/10 in furnished ones
- Never allow hens to run out of feed or water
- Watch for dominant peckers. Severe offenders should be removed, culled or debeaked (if allowed)
- A useful technique, which was recently proposed and tested and shows good promise, is to hang white polypropylene string in cages or pens. Its purpose is to divert pecking from the plumage of other hens onto the string. It has only been tried on a small scale and is not yet in widespread use, but may help to minimise the problem of feather pecking and cannibalism

MORE INFORMATION



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UKROFS (2000) Standards for Organic Livestock and Livestock Products.