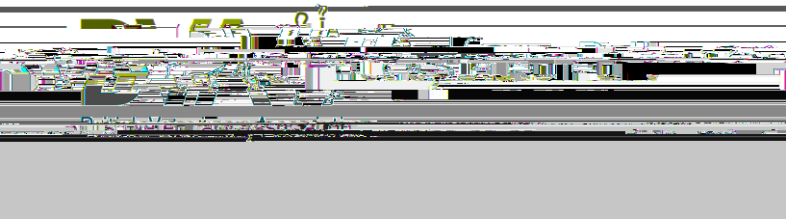


BVA and BVPA policy position on feather pecking in laying hens

Executive summary

BVA and BVPA believe that prevention and management of feather pecking, which is a complex and multifactorial problem, are essential goals, given the impact on animal health and welfare. Although feather pecking cannot be eliminated, optimising management practices can reduce the frequency and likelihood of this behaviour, thereby improving welfare.

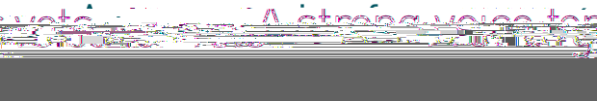
In the interests of animal health and welfare, BVA and BVPA believe that:

Recommendation 1: All vets in practice should familiarise themselves with a basic understanding of how to reduce the likelihood of and manage an outbreak of feather pecking. Sector experts should seek to share their knowledge more widely, in general publications and events.

Recommendation 2: Poultry keepers should work to reduce feather pecking behaviours even if birds' beaks have been treated.

Recommendation 3: Retailers, governments, industry and key stakeholders must work together in moving towards a poultry industry that no longer finds a need to routinely treat beaks as a management solution.

Recommendation 4: Poultry keepers and veterinary surgeons should understand the risk factors associated with feather pecking, be able to identify an outbreak, and know what



Recommendation 15: Poultry keepers should have sufficient training and knowledge to provide conscientious care for their flocks and pay careful attention to behaviours for signs of stress and feather pecking.

Recommendation 16: Poultry keepers should be prepared to share data for research into desirable management techniques that may reduce feather pecking.

Recommendation 17: Poultry keepers should monitor welfare of birds closely and implement management changes where necessary, in close liaison with a veterinary surgeon.

Introduction

The issue

Feather pecking is a significant welfare issue in poultry keeping, where birds peck at the feathers of other birds, sometimes pulling them out and eating them. The challenges of feather pecked birds can be immense; the health and welfare of the affected birds is greatly compromised, and the physical,

by the recipient. It can indicate a welfare problem in the bird performing the behaviour, and precede more serious pecking.

Severe feather pecking: Severe feather pecking causes the most damage to the recipient. It consists of forceful pecks and pulling of feathers that are frequently eaten and results in feather loss especially on the back, vent and tail area. Victims of severe feather pecking often initially move away, squawk or confront the pecker in response to receiving severe feather pecks as these are painful. If severe feather pecking continues, however, victims have also been observed to surrender to being pecked and remain still.

Cannibalistic pecking: Cannibalistic pecking occurs when severe feather pecking has led to feather loss and bald patches. Pecking can then continue on the skin, leading to wounds and may eventually lead to the victim's death due to excessive blood loss, tissue damage and infections.

share their knowledge with a wider audience, most feasibly through general veterinary publications and at mainstream events.

Recommendation 1: All vets in practice should familiarise themselves with a basic understanding of how to reduce the likelihood of and manage an outbreak of feather pecking before giving advice to any clients owning poultry. Sector experts should seek to share their knowledge more widely, in general publications and events.

What is beak treatment?

As a precautionary measure, it is standard practice to blunt beaks to prevent the development of the sharp hook on the beak of adult birds. This is referred to as 'beak trimming' in legislation, but is more widely referred to as 'beak treatment' in industry and practice.

The process involves focusing a high intensity infra-red beam at the tip of the beak, which penetrates the hard outer horn, altering a clearly marked zone of the underlying tissue. The chick's head is securely held in a rubber holder to prevent movement of its head throughout the process, enabling precise and reliable treatment of the beak. There is no open wound and one to three weeks later, the tissue behind the affected area heals and the beak tip is lost.

Beak trimming is only permitted on birds up to 10 days old using infra-red technology, and only for the purposes of reducing injurious pecking[10]. In practice, it is carried out at day-old in the hatchery, at a time when their beaks are still soft. The infra-red method removes operator error and inconsistency, and research has shown that it does not result in chronic pain or other adverse consequences for sensory function[11], so offers significant improvements with regard to animal welfare over previous methods.

Beak treatment reduces the injuries and mortality rate caused by feather pecking, but does not prevent the abnormal beh50 1 720 eour fe04 refeto h50 1 720 eour fe04 refeto h50 1 720 e0 G[h

appropriate equipment[12]. This may reduce the fatalities and welfare harms associated with the outbreak, but the beak is a sensory organ, so the act of beak trimming may cause pain, suffering and distress[13]. It should therefore only be considered as a last resort, once all other intervention strategies have been attempted and following veterinary advice. Note that emergency beak trimming is only allowed for laying hens and is not permitted for broiler breeds.

The UK poultry industry is aiming to reduce the need to treat beaks. Although this process does reduce the harms associated with feather pecking, it does not address the underlying causes. The beak is also a primary means by which a bird interacts with its environment, although research suggests that "IR beak treatment of day old chicks does not result in chronic adverse consequences for sensory function, nor does it demonstrate evidence of chronic pain associated with the procedure"[14].. Poultry keepers should therefore work to reduce feather pecking behaviours even if birds' beaks have been treated, but should not cease beak treatment until they can be confident that this will not result in significantly increased risk of injurious pecking.

As consumer expectation and demand changes, the pressure to avoid beak treatment is also likely to increase. Retailers can have a significant impact on industry practices, so have a responsibility to ensure they are aware of the complexities of the issue and possible wider implications before they ask the poultry industry to make any changes. The UK Government have previously proposed bans on beak trimming of laying hens in all production systems, under the Welfare of Farmed Animals Regulations. In 2010, BVA supported the postponement of these bans due to the welfare issues likely to result from increased injurious pecking, but they are expected to be raised again in the future. Further research, funding and commitment to find desirable genotypes and management techniques which reduce or prevent injurious pecking solutions are needed before such a ban can be considered.

Recommendation 2: Poultry keepers should work to reduce feather pecking behaviours even if birds' beaks have been treated.

Recommendation 3: Retailers, governments, industry and key stakeholders must work together in moving towards a poultry industry that no longer finds a need to routinely treat beaks as a management solution.

Management of risk factors

Feather pecking is a complex problem and very unpredictable. It has been suggested that feather pecking is associated with stress[15,16] and boredom, which can be affected by a wide range of factors. Any sudden change in environment, disease (for example, red mite) or management can act as a stressor, leading to an outbreak of injurious pecking.

The accumulation of a number of factors can lead to problems, including:

- Bird temperament
- Health
- The transition from rearing to laying accommodation
- Housing design and layout
- Lighting
- Diet and foraging
- Variation in bird weights

[12] http://www.legislation.gov.uk/uksi/2010/3034/made/data.pdfon
[13] FAWC (2007) Opinion on Beak Trimming of Laying Hens https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/fawc-opinion-on-beak-trimming-of-laying-hens
[14] McKeegan, D. and Philbey, A. (2012) Chronic neurophysiological and anatomical changes associated with infra-red beak treatment and their implications for laying hen welfare. Animal Welfare, 21(2), pp. 207-217. (doi:10.7120/09627286.21.2.207)
[15]

should be minimised as much as possible and managed by mixing old and new diets through a transitionary phase. Changes from high to low protein diets should be avoided. Any feeding plan should be developed and regularly reviewed in close liaison with a veterinary surgeon, bearing in

Recommendation 14: Natural behaviours, including foraging and roaming, must be encouraged as much as possible through provision of various types of enrichment.

Keeper knowledge and management

Conscientious and knowledgeable flock management play a vital role in minimising stress levels[30].

Damage caused by feather pecking has been shown to reduce with increased experience of the farmer. Farmers who have a good understanding of the innate needs of the birds are more able to adapt their attitude and management to the needs of the animals, thus reducing feather pecking[31].

Changes to management can also lead to aggressive pecking. However, the motivators are different to injurious pecking and need to be tackled differently. It is important for the keeper to take time to observe the birds in order to understand the type of pecking occurring in the flock.

Poultry farmers should be adequately trained to care for their flocks, pay attention to detail, spend sufficient time with the birds to learn about their normal and abnormal behaviours, be conscientious and diligent and maintain good records. Examples of useful training schemes include Lion Training Passport, and AssureWel welfare training.

Keepers should read the FeatherWel guides, which provide clear, practical information on how to reduce feather pecking. Keepers should also check the requirements of farm assurance schemes, which require an animal health and welfare plan to ensure birds' welfare needs are met.

Recommendation 15: Poultry keepers should have sufficient training and knowledge to provide conscientious care for their flocks and pay careful attention to behaviours for signs of stress and feather pecking.

Recommendation 16: Poultry keepers should be prepared to share data for research into desirable management techniques that may reduce feather pecking.

Recommendation 17: Poultry keepers should monitor welfare of birds closely and implement management changes where necessary, in close liaison with a veterinary surgeon.

More information:

Defra guide to the practical management of feather pecking & cannibalism in free range laying hens

BVA policy on Abnormal behaviour

FAWC opinion on beak trimming