

ORGANIC



organic farming technical summary

Preventing, and coping, with feather pecking

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Feather pecking can take different forms however it may be injurious and, if blood is drawn, can lead to cannibalism as the birds tend to be attracted to the red colour of the blood.

Factors that can predispose a flock to feather pecking include:

- High levels of activity – these may be caused by environmental factors such as high light levels or frequent disturbance and by genetic factors (eg some egg lines may be more active than some meat lines) among others.
- High stocking density – leads to frequent disturbance and bird to bird interaction - this in turn can lead to feather pecking.

Injurious feather pecking is more likely to take place while the bird is in the poultry house rather than when the bird is on-range. Because of the type of housing and other factors associated with extensive systems such as the difficulty in controlling light levels and bird-to-bird interaction, birds housed on extensive systems can be more prone to injurious feather pecking than those housed intensively. In addition to the variable light levels, the type of genotype used and the risk of predators disturbing the flock are two further potential factors that can lead to an outbreak of feather pecking while the birds are housed.

The risks of a significant outbreak of feather pecking can be minimised if:

- Care is taken to prevent shafts of light entering the poultry house (eg via ventilation ducts). While complete control of light would be desirable it can be difficult to achieve in practice and diffuse low level light is less of a stimulus to feather peck than bright shafts of light.
- When buying in point-of-lay pullets obtain birds from a reputable source – the way the birds have reared can affect their behaviour (eg birds that have been reared in a stressful environment may be more flighty when in production phase).
- The birds are not disturbed more frequently or to a greater extent than is absolutely necessary. This includes reviewing: egg collection procedures, allowing visitors onto the unit, and preventing disturbance from other sources such as vermin. The house should be vermin proofed but also the area around the house should be kept free of vermin and with attention being given to the larger mammals such as fox and mink.
- The health of the flock is monitored carefully and, should any bird show signs of injurious feather pecking, the wound is treated so as to minimise infection and to cover the red colouration of the damaged area.
- Depending on the layout of the house, it may be feasible to place injured birds in 'hospital pens' for a limited period. Care must be taken however to ensure that birds within the hospital pen have access to food, water and adequate space.

The control measures that the poultry keeper can utilise should an outbreak of feather pecking occur are limited. If the outbreak is serious or is repeated over several flocks it is advisable to discuss what action can be taken with your veterinarian and/or an advisor from the certification body.

However do not delay – a quick response is essential if feather pecking is to be controlled.

Try to determine the cause of the outbreak by evaluating the flock against the factors listed above. If the stimulus for the outbreak cannot be identified then there are two options.

- reducing the light level in the house
- consider beak-tipping the flock

The former should be relatively easy and inexpensive to implement. The latter should be discussed with your certification body and, if appropriate your veterinarian.

Irrespective of the control measures adopted it is imperative that injured birds are treated or, if required, culled humanely.

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