

Laying Hen Standards Technical Advisory Group Online meeting
9am Tuesday 16th November 2021
Meeting Summary

Barn systems

The group discussed the four proposed additions to barn systems: natural light, enhanced enrichment, stocking density and winter gardens/verandas. Whilst there could be welfare benefits, concerns were raised about the potential impact on financial viability of these for many barn producers. Issues were also raised about the possible unintended consequences of introducing natural light into barn systems and how this would be managed. Stocking density and winter gardens come with associated financial costs.

Beak Trimming

A legal ban on beak trimming is likely in the foreseeable future and the group discussed the challenges that producers might face. The importance of good proactive management is key when housing intact beak birds and more time investment in each flock appears to be one of the most effective elements.

Chick culling

The group discussed the emotive associations with using macerators. Limiting use of macerators purely as a backup method was proposed. This is most likely the case already for layer chick hatcheries but it is important to consider that the hatchery standards cover all poultry species.

In-ovo sexing was discussed and it seems unlikely that it will be adopted into the UK industry in the near future. There have been some discussions with retailers but concerns of accuracy and the age that embryos are sexed appear to be the main barriers. In addition the cost of the process would need to be accounted for. The RSPCA are concerned with the welfare of alternative feed sources if male chicks are no longer available. Further information will be gathered on the numbers of chicks that are used in the pet and zoo food industry currently.

Keel Bone Damage

The group gave positive feedback on the use of raised perches by birds. Assessment of keel bone fractures were discussed and some producers have been routinely scoring birds keel bones for a few years. This data will be shared to look at the prevalence of keel fractures in UK flocks.

A recent study was published that highlights the possibility that small laying hens laying large eggs may be causing keel bone fractures at the caudal tip. The group discussed the current demand for large eggs and the pressure this puts on layers. There are a number of interventions to reduce large eggs but it was felt that they might be hard to mandate within a scheme but achievable as management strategies.

Depopulation

Regarding alternative catching methods, the group discussed the logistics of the

upright catching method. This method has been trialled on UK farms and it was pointed out that more catchers are required and the process takes longer. Although birds initially appeared calmer when handled, due to the extended catching time they became disturbed and harder to catch. It was concluded that future house designs should take depopulation into account. Preparing the laying shed for depopulation was discussed, with all members in agreement that litter should be managed to aid depopulation and the amount reduced in certain areas. There were concerns that this may have welfare impacts if removed too early, however it appears that only problem areas of litter are targeted, this is not generally an issue.

AOB

The group discussed some general queries relating to the standards. These will be taken into consideration and discussed further at the next meeting.

Meeting close

The next meeting will be held in quarter two of 2022, which will focus on proposed amendments to the standards.