

European Food Safety Authority's Scientific Panel on Animal Health and Welfare publishes its report on the welfare aspects of various systems of keeping laying hens

Under European Council Directive 1999/74/EC, which lays down minimum standards for the protection of laying hens, the European Commission is required to submit a report to Council regarding the various systems for keeping laying hens, based on current scientific opinion. Accordingly, the European Food Safety Authority's Scientific Panel on Animal Health and Welfare (AHAW) has produced a comprehensive 143-page assessment of laying hen welfare in these different systems, taking into account the "pathological, zootechnical, physiological and ethological aspects of the various systems, and of their health and environmental impact".

The report begins with an acknowledgement of the advances in the knowledge of welfare aspects of hen biology since the last such report, the 1996 Report on the Welfare of Laying Hens by the Scientific Veterinary Committee, Animal Welfare Section (SVC/EC 1996), in particular with regard to behavioural priorities, prevalence of injuries, and pain perception. The report discusses the current state of all aspects of laying hen welfare with regard to housing systems, including how animal health is affected by systems, the physiological indicators affected by systems, productivity related to systems, behavioural priorities (including the ability of systems to satisfy behavioural priorities), areas of concern/management of problems, food safety affected by different production systems, and finally a welfare assessment of the different systems.

For those requiring a more succinct version, the AHAW Panel has also produced an accompanying opinion on the report, in which the data contained within the report are assessed and conclusions and recommendations made. In summarising it identifies the most severe threats to bird welfare in the various systems as follows:

"In conventional cages:

- Low bone strength and fractures sustained during depopulation.
- The inability to perform some high priority behaviours including nesting, perching, foraging and dustbathing.

In small furnished cages:

- Feather pecking and cannibalism in flocks with non beak trimmed birds.
- Depending on lay-out, some high priority behaviours (eg foraging, dust bathing) can not be performed or are limited.

In large furnished cages:

- No data available on relevant issues like bone fractures, feather pecking and cannibalism.

In non-cage systems:

- Bone fractures sustained during lay.
- Feather pecking and cannibalism in flocks with non beak trimmed birds.

- If an outdoor run is provided for birds in non-cage systems, there is additionally a high risk of parasitic diseases."

In concluding, the opinion indicates particular areas where data are lacking and further research required. Included as high priority topics are:

Health and disease — in particular research into new, effective and feasible treatments for the control of endo- and ecto-parasites, the causes of fractures sustained during the laying period, and better methods of detection of fractures.

Injurious pecking and cannibalism — research into why particular birds start to show cannibalistic behaviour, the possible link between cannibalistic behaviour and commercially important traits, and selection against the damaging effects of pecking.

Foraging — research in order to more clearly define availability, qualities and amounts of foraging facilities appropriate to good welfare during rearing and laying.

Comfort behaviour — more research is required in order to define the qualities and space allowances of facilities required to satisfy dust-bathing motivation.

Rearing — research is required to understand the impact of how birds are reared on their ability to function well in different systems later in life.

Design — future research should focus on the provision and use of litter and occupational devices, space requirements, group size and stocking density, and lighting.

SVC (Scientific Veterinary Committee — Section Animal Welfare) 1996 Report on the welfare of laying hens. European Commission DG VI/BII.2

Welfare aspects of various systems for keeping laying hens. Scientific Report of the Scientific Panel on Animal Health and Welfare of the European Food Safety Authority on a request from the European Commission related to the welfare aspects of various systems of keeping laying hens (Question No EFSA-Q-2003-092). Adopted by the AHAW Panel on 14th and 15th September 2004. 143 pp A4.

Opinion of the Scientific Panel on Animal Health and Welfare on a request from the Commission related to the welfare aspects of various systems of keeping laying hens. 24 pp A4. Adopted by the AHAW Panel on 10th and 11th November 2004. Available at http://www.efsa.eu.int/science/ahaw/ahaw_opinions/831_en.html

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UFAW

New European Council Regulation on the protection of animals during transport

On 22nd December 2004, the European Union launched Council Regulation (EC) No 1/2005 on the protection of animals during transport and related operations. The Regulation, which amends Directives 64/432/EEC and 93/119/EC and Regulation (EC) No 1255/97, is the result of detailed discussion of proposals first published by the Commission in July 2003. It will enter into force by 5th