

Reports and Comments

FAWC Opinion on Enriched Cages and on Beak Trimming of Laying Hens

The UK's Farm Animal Welfare Council (FAWC) has issued two Opinions; one covering beak trimming of laying hens and the other, enriched cages for laying hens. Such 'Opinions' are a recent edition to the FAWC's methods for advising the Government about areas of animal welfare concern and their aim is to address specific issues in a shorter format and timeframe than traditional FAWC reports. Each Opinion provides a 'background' to the chosen focus followed by an 'evidence' and then 'critical issue' section. A cost/benefit ethical analysis is also included and finally an opinion, detailing the FAWC's advice and recommendations to the Government.

According to these Opinions there are approximately 28.6 million hens in the UK laying flock, with the split between production systems being: 62.7% conventional cage; 27.2% free range; 5.1% barn; and 5.0% organic.

Beak trimming is currently a permitted mutilation in the UK when carried out to reduce injurious feather pecking or cannibalism. However, the Welfare of Farmed Animals (England) Amendment Regulations 2002 (SI 1646) states that beak trimming may only be practiced up until 31 December 2010. The FAWC's Opinion explores many of the factors surrounding beak trimming and concludes with a number of advisory points and recommendations, the main one being that the proposed ban on beak trimming of laying hens by 31 December 2010 should not be introduced in Great Britain. Although the FAWC judges beak trimming to be "a major insult to the hen's welfare" their view remains that until alternatives become available to reduce the likelihood of injurious pecking, which is unpredictable in onset and a cause of significant pain, distress, suffering and death, beak trimming will remain a necessity.

The forthcoming move from enriched to unenriched cages is another important and imminent event which will affect many laying hen flocks and the egg industry as a whole. In line with Council Directive 99/74/EC conventional cages will be banned throughout the EU from 1 January 2012 and only enriched cages permitted. The FAWC drew on the results of a number of Defra funded projects investigating various laying hen production systems and also considered the findings of the EC funded 'LayWel' project to illustrate how various housing systems differ in terms of hen welfare. The conclusions of the Opinion includes: "all commercial systems of production for laying hens offer some compromise in terms of the hen's welfare. However, well-managed enriched cage systems are able to offer the potential for an acceptable balance between the requirements for the hen's health and welfare, and public health, in combination with economic and environmental considerations". To ensure that best practice is adopted when managing laying hens in enriched cages, the FAWC recommends that the results of recent Government research investigating enriched cages should be disseminated widely throughout the poultry industry. They also believe that the Code of

Recommendations for the Welfare of Laying hens should be revised to ensure that egg producers are provided with the most up-to-date guidance on enriched cages.

FAWC Opinion on Enriched Cages for Laying Hens (November 2007). A4, 15 pages. Copies are available from FAWC Secretariat, Area 701, 1A Page Street, London, SW1P 4PQ, UK. www.fawc.org.uk.

FAWC Opinion on Beak Trimming of Laying Hens (November 2007). A4, 12 pages. Copies are available from FAWC Secretariat, Area 701, 1A Page Street, London, SW1P 4PQ, UK. www.fawc.org.uk.

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Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament and the Council on the Various Systems of Rearing Laying Hens in Particular Those Covered by Directive 1999/74/EC

Directive 1999/74/EC recognised three farming methods for rearing laying hens within the European Union (EU): unenriched cages, enriched cages and alternative systems. The Directive came into force in July 1999 with the aim of protecting laying hen welfare by setting out a core set of minimum standards. Article 10 of these regulations required the European Commission (EC) to submit to the Council a report based on scientific opinion and covering the various rearing systems for laying hens, taking into account pathological, zootechnical, physiological and ethological aspects as well as environmental and health impacts. The report was also required to incorporate the socio-economic implications of the various systems and their effects on the European Communities economic partners.

In line with this requirement, the European Commission has published a Communication for the European Parliament and the Council (see details below) taking into account the above factors. The report is based on a number of independent studies, including: a scientific report by the European Food Safety Authority (EFSA) which looked into the welfare aspects of various systems of keeping laying hens; an EU funded project, 'LayWel' which considered the welfare implications of changes in production systems for laying hens and EGGDEFENCE, a project that investigated egg safety and quality in relation to different housing systems. A number of other research projects are still underway.

Perhaps the most important requirement of the Directive was that from January 2012 the rearing of laying hens using conventional cages would no longer be permitted. Egg producers using conventional cages have been hesitant to change their method of production due to uncertainty within the industry over whether the ban was actually going to take place in 2012 or later, or even whether the ban would come into force at all. The view within the industry is that the cost of conversion together with increasing production costs would put them at a competitive disadvantage to egg