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Consumer attitudes to injurious pecking in free-range egg production

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Abstract

Free-range egg producers face continuing problems from injurious pecking (IP) which has financial consequences for farmers and poor welfare implications for birds. Beak-trimming has been practised for many years to limit the damage caused by IP, but with the UK Government giving notification that they intend to ban beak-trimming in 2016, considerable efforts have been made to devise feasible housing, range and management strategies to reduce IP. A recent research project investigated the efficacy of a range of IP-reducing management strategies, the mean costs of which came to around 5 pence per bird. Here, the results of the above project's consumer survey are presented: consumers' attitudes to free-range egg production are detailed showing that, whilst consumers had a very positive attitude towards free-range eggs, they were especially uninformed about some aspects of free-range egg production. The contingent valuation technique was used to estimate the price premium consumers would be prepared to pay to ensure that hens do not suffer from IP: this was calculated as just over 3% on top of the prevailing retail price of free-range eggs. These findings reinforce other studies that have found that whilst consumers are not generally well-informed about certain specific welfare problems faced by animals under free-range conditions, they are prepared to pay to improve animal welfare. Indeed, the study findings suggest that producers could obtain an additional price premium if they demonstrate the welfare provenance of their eggs, perhaps through marketing the eggs as coming from birds with intact beaks. This welfare provenance issue could usefully be assured to consumers by the introduction of a mandatory, single, accredited EU-wide welfare-standards labelling scheme.

Keywords: *animal welfare, consumer attitudes, free-range layers, injurious pecking, management strategies, willingness to pay*