Farmer attitudes to injurious pecking in laying hens and to potential control strategies

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Abstract

Farmers’ recognition of health and welfare problems, and their responses to related intervention programmes, such as those to reduce injurious pecking in hens, directly influence the welfare of animals in their care. Changing those responses can be achieved through a re-positioning of social drivers as well as from individual behaviour. This study begins by considering how certain levels of plumage damage become normalised while others might be considered unacceptable. Drawing upon in-depth farmer interviews, the study investigates how management practices for addressing the issue of injurious pecking are developed and enacted, looking at the relative influence of intrinsic and extrinsic individual behavioural factors. Twelve farmers with varied uptake of evidence-based management strategies designed to reduce levels of injurious pecking were interviewed. Although farmers ranked images of flocks with various levels of plumage damage in a similar order to scientists, their perception of levels of injurious pecking in their own flocks varied, and was not consistently associated with the actual levels measured. Most farmers recognised both financial and welfare implications of injurious pecking and expressed pride in having a good-looking flock. The popular management strategies were those designed to redirect pecking to other objects, whereas a substantial barrier to uptake was the perception of creating other problems: for example, mislaid eggs if early access to litter and range were adopted. To achieve uptake of knowledge that improves animal welfare on-farm, it may be necessary both to shift the norms perceived as acceptable, and to overcome barriers to change that include lack of time and understanding, by providing impartial advice and facilitation of ownership of the issues.

Keywords: animal welfare, changing attitudes, injurious pecking, laying hens, management strategies, perception

Introduction

The effects of injurious pecking by one bird on another are recognised as significant welfare and economic issues in laying-hen flocks. Not only can the recipient bird suffer considerable physical damage, which is painful and can lead to death from heat loss, disease or cannibalism, but injurious pecking can have a wider effect upon the entire flock, raising stress levels and the susceptibility for disease. In this paper we use the term injurious pecking to include gentle and severe feather-pecking, cannibalistic pecking and vent-pecking (Lambton et al 2013). Injurious pecking does not include aggressive behaviour, which is usually directed at the head, as it is thought to be a form of redirected foraging behaviour and may indicate that the environment is not meeting the behavioural needs of the hens (Weeks & Nicol 2006). Injurious pecking is associated with lower egg-production levels at around 30 weeks (Huber-Eicher & Sebő 2001), partly explained by increased mortality, as victims of injurious pecking die sooner (Yngvesson et al 2004), thus producing fewer eggs over their lifetime with clear economic consequences. It is a widespread concern within the poultry sector as there is evidence of it occurring in all housing systems and across different bird ages (Bestman et al 2009). Between 50–90% of free-range and organic flocks show evidence of injurious pecking (Bestman et al 2009; Lambton et al 2010), while in 100 commercial UK free-range flocks monitored by Lambton et al (2013), the mean prevalence of severe pecking behaviour varied from 55% at 20 weeks, to 83% at 40 weeks of age.

In most commercial systems, the impact of injurious pecking is managed by routine beak-trimming although this does not necessarily reduce the performance of all injurious pecking behaviours (Pötzsch et al 2001; Lambton et al 2010) as it does not address the causal factors underlying injurious pecking. Beak-trimming is a welfare concern (FAWC 2007) as it is a potentially painful mutilation that, in principle, should be avoided (CEC 1999). In line with this, the UK Government has scheduled the current derogation that permits beak-trimming to terminate at the end of 2015 (House of Commons Library 2012). However, to ensure that hen welfare is not compromised, it needs to be possible to effectively manage injurious pecking by other means (FAWC 2009). The