

© 2016 Universities Federation for Animal Welfare
The Old School, Brewhouse Hill, Wheathampstead,
Hertfordshire AL4 8AN, UK
www.ufaw.org.uk

Animal Welfare 2016, 25: 29-38
ISSN 0962-7286
doi: 10.7120/09627286.25.1.029

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

LJ Palczynski[†], H Buller[‡], SL Lambton[†] and CA Weeks^{*†}

[†] Animal Welfare and Behaviour Group, University of Bristol, School of Veterinary Sciences, Langford, Bristol BS40 5DU, UK

[‡] Geography, College of Life and Environmental Sciences, University of Exeter, Rennes Drive, Exeter EX4 4RJ, UK

* Contact for correspondence and requests for reprints: claire.weeks@bristol.ac.uk

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