



# Food Animal Initiative

ENVIRONMENTS FIT FOR ANIMALS FIT FOR THEIR ENVIRONMENT

## FAI Technical Datasheet - Managing pullets through point of lay - Update Po1 August 2005

Pullets are commonly moved to laying accommodation very close to the point of lay. This is very stressful as the new accommodation may well have different feeding, drinking, flooring, lighting and type of feed. The major welfare issue in laying hens is injurious pecking which can lead to trauma and death. Our hypothesis at FAI is that management during this time is key to solving the problem.

### 'the facts.....'

Commercial laying hens come into lay at about 19 weeks and best practice is to move them to the laying accommodation at about 16 weeks. This can be early or delayed due to problems in the rearing flocks or during the 'turn round' period i.e. the time between one flock and the next.

Currently pullets are generally reared in separate accommodation to laying hens as the expensive equipment used for egg collection is not necessary at this stage. Commercial pullets are most commonly reared on litter although some are reared in cages. The Lion Code does not allow pullets reared in cages to enter free range systems. Laying hen accommodation (excluding cages) is generally a mixture of slats and litter.

Pullets are most commonly reared using bell drinkers and chain feeders whereas laying accommodation often has nipple drinkers and pan feeders.

Current best practice is to rear pullets with access to perches although this is not common. Hens are strongly motivated to perch at night<sup>1</sup> and will perch on a range of materials.<sup>2</sup>

Previous experience has been shown to be an important component of an animal's ability to cope with an environment and thus to make several changes at point of lay as described above will increase stress levels during what is already a physiologically demanding period.

Floor eggs are a common problem in laying hens and birds are generally kept in during the first few weeks of lay to train them to use the nest boxes. This practice potentially contributes to the problem of injurious pecking experienced to varying degrees in almost all laying flocks as the birds are confined and naturally peck at objects around them - in this case another chicken! Feather cover and quality is very variable the end of lay with most flocks having a significant degree of feather loss.



Hubbard JA 57's

### '.... the FAI response!'

At FAI we have both laying hens (4,000) and a small flock (250) of JA57 broiler breeders on site. All birds are kept to RSPCA Freedom Foods Standards.<sup>3</sup>

Two pilot studies have been carried out with the JA57 broiler breeders. The following features were incorporated:

- Birds purchased with beaks intact.
- Birds reared in the accommodation in which they will lay.
- Perches in the form of straw bales introduced from day 7.
- Nest boxes with perches introduced at 15 weeks.
- The facilities in the house are litter floor, bell drinkers and tube feeders.

The results from these pilot studies are:

- No aggressive pecking.
- Feather quality at the end of lay is good apart from some mating damage which would not occur in laying flocks.
- Floor eggs without 'training' have been 1.5%.

These results could be due to a genetic factor as well as management and funding is being sought to study commercial laying hens under the same regime. Recent work at FAI has shown that onset of lay in laying pullets received underweight can be successfully delayed (even in very hot weather) until target weight is reached by allowing access to the veranda only to limit day length.

1. IAS Olsson & LJ Keeling Animal Welfare 2002, 11:1, 11-19
2. NR Lambe Animal Welfare 1998, 7:2, 203-216
3. RSPCA Freedom Foods Standards for laying hens. To receive a copy phone 08700101181

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