



Laying Hen Welfare Forum (LHWF) Study Tour to Austria (4 - 5 June 2019)

Executive Summary

(This summary includes some UK statistics¹ for comparison).

Key points from a study tour to Austria during June 2019 (hosted by Lohmann). This included a visit to 1 rearing and 2 layer farms:

- Lohmann distributor (trading as Schropfer GmbH in Austria) has approximately 80% of the Austrian market and all pullets are reared in Austria
- Beak trimming is still legally allowed, but since 2007 not practised and is prohibited in the private AMA - Marketing - QM Programme. All laying hens producing eggs for the retail market must take part in the AMA system
- National flock size is 6.9 million (UK 41 million)
- Self-sufficiency 90% (UK 87% in 2018)
- Production systems are free-range (23%), organic (11.7%) and barn (64%) with the few enriched cage farms being phased out by the end of 2019. (2018 UK data: 44% cage, 52% FR, 2.5% organic, 1.5% barn. Birds reared organically do not require an outdoor range)
- As in the UK, Austria is predominantly a brown egg market. Most farms are family-run with a maximum free-range flock size of 9,600 birds
- Typical depopulation age 72-80 weeks (similar to the UK)
- Most houses (particularly new-builds) have winter-gardens, whereas these are rare in the UK. Birds typically do not have access to the range until 26 weeks of age (in the UK for FR and organic this is from placement at approximately 17 weeks of age).
- Lighting is generally 20 lux high frequency LEDs with no nest box lights used
- It was stated that in-house enrichments are not normally provided, although a few rearers and layer producers in Austria use straw bales or pecking blocks. Pecking blocks were seen on the rearing site visited. In the UK enrichments are standard practice (Lion Code and other assurance schemes require at least 2).
- A survey by Schropfer GmbH of 900,000 layers indicated no more than 10% feather damage, but it was unclear how the damage was assessed
- It was stated that examination of birds at slaughter indicated that keel damage is not an issue. However, methodology and sample size was unclear and is

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¹ <https://www.egginfo.co.uk/egg-facts-and-figures/industry-information/data>

contrary to data from several European countries where keel damage is widespread in laying hens².

- Selection by Lohmann for feather cover is only 1 trait in an index which covers some 23 commercial characteristics. It is undertaken in 3 countries on the basis of behaviour and plumage damage around the tail and cloaca within family groups
- Lohmann has determined the heritability of beak length, which they are reducing to improve feather cover
- A lot of importance was placed on rear and getting the rear right (e.g. matching rear with lay and rearing in aviary systems). Rearers receive a management fee of €1 per pullet with most variable costs covered by the breeding company
- Mortality levels in intact beak flocks are estimated to be a third higher than beak tipped
- Farm gate price is significantly higher than UK prices: €0.72/dozen Small; €1.10 Medium; €1.32/dozen Large and €1.44/dozen for Very Large. (UK FR egg average 79p/dozen³ (approximately €0.92))
- Egg size, XL – more than 73g, L 63g – 73g, M 53g – 63g and S – under 53g
- EU grants of 25% are available in Austria to cover both the building and equipment
- The Austrian experience of managing intact flocks is to pay particular attention to the quality of: pullets, lighting, feed and water, housing and ventilation; and overall management.

² Riber et al (2018) The Influence of Keel Bone Damage on Welfare of Laying Hens
<https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC5835507/>

³ https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/843358/eggs-statsnotice-31oct19.pdf