



New trial facilitates successful strategies for maintaining feather cover in laying hens

- LHWF hails 'remarkable response' from producers in implementing new ideas -

A new report from the Laying Hen Welfare Forum (LHWF) has provided practical help for producers seeking to reduce injurious feather-pecking in laying hens.

The 'Maintaining feather cover in laying hens' report is the culmination of a two-and-a-half year Defra funded project through the EIP¹, to explore ways of improving flock management, reducing injurious pecking in laying flocks and enhancing the welfare of laying hens and pullets.

The study saw the LHWF focus its efforts on supporting producers to maintain good feather cover in both infra-red beak treated² and intact beak flocks by adopting preventative measures against injurious pecking.

While it recognised that there is no single strategy that will work on all farms, the LHWF promoted a wide range of evidence-based strategies, which were tailored to meet the specific needs of each flock, based on the specialist knowledge and requirements of individual farmers, who best know their flock and housing needs.

Using an innovative new approach - Motivational Interviewing (MI) - the LHWF supported 29 producers who volunteered their flocks to be part of the project. Producers took ownership over maintaining feather cover by creating bespoke Feather Cover Action Plans (FCAP), in conjunction with a trained facilitator.

¹ RDPE, European Innovation Partnership (EIP) grant; 106330 'Maintaining Feather Cover in Laying Hens'.

² IRBT - In the UK, the beaks are subject to Infra-Red Beak Treatment, which is a procedure carried out on day-old chicks in a hatchery and involves focusing a high intensity infra-red beam at the tip of the beak. Approximately 2-3 weeks later the tip of the beak falls off. IRBT is non-invasive and replaced 'hot-blade' beak trimming.

The 29 flocks, which were mostly based in England, were representative of the industry in terms of production type and size.

The MI approach resulted in 80% of producers altering their management and resource provision, with 90% of free range producers and half those using enriched colony cages making changes. A diverse uptake of actions was seen; range enhancements; planting trees; artificial shelters; to providing an array of enrichments inside the house. Up to nine actions were planned in producers' FCAP, with an average of three on free range farms.

Mark Williams, Secretary LHWF, said: "We were delighted to see the high level of response from producers in implementing new ideas. Up to nine changes were added to their FCAP's, complementing a number of strategies already in place and with some initially not seeing feather cover as a main issue."

While some changes were inexpensive, such as providing rope, plastic objects, or balls in the poultry house, others involved substantial investment like verandas or time-consuming activities such as planting trees, renewing and strategically placing artificial shelters to encourage ranging, continually replenishing Lucerne, or removing capped litter.

Reflecting on the value of their FCAP, and the facilitator's support, producers recognised that being part of the project not only raised their awareness of injurious pecking and the importance of maintaining good feather cover, but also motivated them to make changes to achieve this. Half the producers felt their FCAP had been successful in reducing injurious pecking within their flocks. The main motivators for maintaining good feather cover were bird welfare, productivity, customer relations and pride (in a good-looking flock).

As a result of the project, five producer-led videos have been produced, for example in maintaining good, friable litter, which is a key strategy for maintaining feather cover³.

The LHWF undertook wider field research into strategies to prevent injurious pecking, including visiting The Netherlands and Austria in 2018 and 2019 respectively, to gain insight on managing intact beak flocks. While not directly comparable to production in the UK, the visits did provide useful insights, in particular the importance of synchronicity between the rearing and laying environments and the benefits of verandas in free range units. There were challenges in transitioning to running non-beak trimmed flocks in terms of increased mortality, worse feather cover (which UK consumers would not accept) and a shortening of the production cycle.

³ Videos available at <https://lhwf.co.uk/>

Andrew Joret, Chairman of the LHWF, said: “We believe that this project is a major step forward in the prevention of injurious feather pecking and we would like to thank everyone involved in it. Without their support, this would not have been possible. We now have some very robust data which we believe will be of great value to producers.”

We recognise that this is just the start to a more joined-up approach in supporting producers to reduce injurious feather pecking. Following the success of the trial, the LHWF is now delivering MI training to veterinary professionals and is rolling out FCAP’s alongside a new workstream of ‘Synchronicity between rear and lay’. The aim is to ensure that all producers have active, motivating veterinary involvement and support, to facilitate continuous improvement.

Notes to Editors’

- The full report, videos and other resources can be found on the LHWF website <https://lhwf.co.uk/> and EIP-Agri at <https://ec.europa.eu/eip/agriculture>.
- The Laying Hen Welfare Forum (LHWF) was set up in 2015 and brings together expertise from industry, farm, academia and government to explore ways to improve flock management, reduce injurious pecking and improve the welfare of laying hens and pullets. Over the past few years, the LHWF has focused its efforts on helping producers to maintain good feather cover in both trimmed and intact beak birds by adopting preventative measures against injurious pecking.
- Comments from some members of the LHWF and producers involved in the project include:
 - Stephen Lister, poultry veterinarian – “Maintaining good feather cover is a concern for all producers who take a pride in the appearance, welfare and performance of their flocks. The part that injurious pecking plays in this is complex and implementing effective interventions to reduce feather loss can be a challenge. This project demonstrates the role of discussion and partnership in developing a bespoke package of interventions for each farm that can be implemented practically to maintain good feather cover. It illustrates clearly the importance of knowledge exchange and dialogue between producers, their veterinarians and other facilitators in identifying what may work on specific farms and how it can be put into practice effectively to bring about change.”

- Dr Claire Weeks, Honorary Senior Research Fellow, Bristol Veterinary School, University of Bristol - "It is very encouraging to see how an MI-based and producer-led facilitatory approach enabled high uptake of science-based strategies on farm. Academics, vets and other advisors are increasingly realising that a top-down approach doesn't work, particularly in tackling complex issues like IP."
- Dr Jessica Stokes, Lecturer in Farm Animal Welfare Science and Policy, Royal Agricultural University - "Injurious pecking is a multifactorial problem which requires a producer-led approach. Motivational interviewing enables producers to identify, own and implement actions they need to take to improve feather cover. Developing these communication skills within the advisory sector can help facilitate action and change on farm to improve animal welfare."
- Paula Baker, LHWF Project Research Officer - "The work carried out as part of this project revealed that the MI approach has shown to be effective in encouraging producers to search for, share and use new ideas to improve and maintain feather cover in their own flocks. The growing emphasis is now for the LHWF to continue this work with the veterinary community and industry to proactively work towards delivering feather cover action plans (FCAP's) to improve hen welfare."
- Ian Waldron, Lower Langaton Farm - "It's definitely a good project and focuses the mind on feather cover and ways to help maintain good cover. However, I think that as in our experience, you can do everything possible, but sometimes due to the variation in flock behaviour from one flock to the next it can be difficult to get results."
- Michael Thompson, Loathmead Farm – "The LHWF project on maintaining feather cover and Paula gave us guidance and encouragement on managing fully beaked organic flocks. The positive support was always available to improve flock management and reduce injurious pecking on farm."
- Nigel and Susan Smith, Stonecoat Farm - "It was a great opportunity to hear what actions other producers were trying, which we may try in the future. Paula was able to study the birds' behaviour, suggesting ways to enhance and therefore improve their welfare."
- Steve Mclellan, Rymer Farm – "Great to be a part of, because it's always good to review and learn new perspectives towards improving bird welfare."