

Uptake of different types of intervention aimed at reducing injurious pecking on commercial free-range laying hen farms in the UK

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The overall aim of the project is to reduce the levels of injurious pecking in commercial flocks of free range hens by transferring scientific knowledge into practice. For 45 treatment flocks we provided each farm with tailored ongoing management advice on reducing injurious pecking (IP), which was monitored throughout and compared with data from 45 control flocks where no advice was provided. Treatment farms were encouraged to adopt more of the forty or so potential interventions associated with a reduced risk of IP, although all farms were already using some. The range of uptake of these varied (interim results from 31 flocks). Most producers (70-80%) achieved a more uniform and unmixed flock of pullets at placement. Almost half provided a more seamless transition and kept the pullets on their rearing ration for a few days. Uptake of knowledge regarding changes in feed type, chain feeder runs etc. was high (50-100%). Farmers appeared less likely to achieve improvements to the range such as the provision of extra shelter or drainage (25-57%) and only 1 in 5 gave earlier access to range (in part due to severe weather). None of the 3 farmers who used nestbox lights was willing to turn them off. As IP is considered redirected foraging behaviour, considerable effort was directed towards improving litter quality and foraging opportunities, including providing absorbent litter, breeze blocks and compressed alfalfa; thus uptake was high (50-93%). Fear of floor eggs meant only 4 of 10 producers asked were willing to give pullets early access to litter but most who did make the change were enthusiastic about the benefits. Analysis is ongoing to assess the effectiveness of the advisory package in improving bird welfare.

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