Furnished cages for laying hens

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Furnished cages (FCs) were conceived over 30 years ago when the welfare deficiencies of barren conventional ones were realised. Their use was intended to enhance hens’ behavioural repertoire and welfare without the disadvantages of non-cage and extensive housing. Since then their design has been refined and improved, resulting in the much improved performance and hen welfare reported here. Group size has been an important consideration, especially in relation to variation in damaging pecking in differing genotypes with or without beak treatment. Regulations on the latter vary from country to country and have affected design, group size and management. The trend has been to move from small group FCSs, used mainly in Scandinavia, to medium/large group FCMs and FCLs subsequently developed in other countries. The three group sizes have generally performed well under good management. Interventions such as beak trimming and controlled light intensity are most often applied in FCLs and to brown genotypes. Large scale studies, in which performance and welfare have been compared across all currently available systems, enable us to conclude that they are at least as good in FCs as in any other system, and probably superior. Council Directive 1999/74/EC, which requires the demise of all conventional cages in the EU by 2012, has accelerated the move into FCs and it seems likely that the majority of laying hens in Europe will be housed in them for the foreseeable future, with the aim of enhancing laying hen welfare. However, FCs have potential for further improvement; this paper suggests some possible developments.