



MANAGING

FOWL
BEHAVIOUR



AN INTRODUCTION

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Foreword



This publication is an introduction to the handbook *Managing fowl behaviour: A best practice guide to help manage feather pecking and cannibalism in pullet, layer and breeder flocks* which is a comprehensive guide to the causes of feather pecking and cannibalism in poultry and provides on-farm management strategies and husbandry practices to reduce the risk of such an event.

Managing fowl behaviour was written to address the need for information about managing feather pecking and cannibalism in poultry, particularly in free range layer flocks. It provides poultry breeders, pullet rearers and layer farmers with the resources to prevent cannibalism and feather pecking. Included is an overview of the problem, the various solutions available to manage it and resources that can be used by farm managers as a ‘benchmark’ tool to compare their current strategies with those considered to be best practice.

An electronic copy of the handbook, checklists, work instructions and scoring sheets to assist in implementing and monitoring of pecking prevention strategies can be downloaded from the website—www.australianeggs.org.au/for-farmers/animal-care-welfare/

Feather pecking and cannibalism leads to reduced bird wellbeing and lost production. It can be a significant problem for poultry farmers and breeders in Australia. There are a number of on-farm strategies that can be used to reduce the risk of a cannibalism or feather pecking event. These can be complemented by infrared beak treatment and as the last resort, beak trimming with a hot blade.

The information given here is a brief summary of the causes of feather pecking and cannibalism, management strategies and husbandry practices to reduce the risk of an event.

Pecking

Pecking is a natural communal behaviour of poultry. It is used to establish and maintain the flock hierarchy or peck order.

Types of pecking and distinct pecking events			
Type of pecking	Signs	Comment	Injury status
Gentle feather pecking	No feather loss	Normal behaviour Peck often ignored by recipient Used to establish peck order	No injury
Severe feather pecking	Feather loss Recipient may squawk and move away Feather sucking, toe pecking	Abnormal behaviour Forceful feather removal or breaks	Can progress to injury
Pecking at bare body areas	Severe feather pecking targeted at base of tail and vent with injuries, blood and cannibalism	Abnormal behaviour Presence of blood encourages more pecking	Injury Some to many deaths
Types of targeted pecking			
Aggressive feather pecking	Pecking at the recipient's body Aggressor has upright body posture	Abnormal behaviour Dominant bird pecks subordinate bird	Variable injury Occasional death
Vent pecking	Pecking at vent tissue of recipient	Abnormal behaviour Relatively rare	Variable injury Often death

Gentle pecking can turn into feather or targeted pecking which causes feather removal, injury and even death. Birds will display these types of pecking behaviour if they are unable to cope with the 'stressors' in their lives. At first, birds will feather peck, then if the stress level is severe birds will quickly turn from feather pecking to targeted pecking.

Recent research suggests that feather pecking birds are more active and may become frustrated when their environment lacks the stimulation they need. They express this frustration by pecking at the feathers of their flock mates.

Feather and targeted pecking are disruptive behaviours that increase stress and fear levels in the flock. These affect growth, egg production and wellbeing. Some birds also may be prevented from accessing feed, water, nest boxes and pop-holes.

Monitoring farm practices to minimise feather pecking and the risk of cannibalism

Producers can use the checklists in *Managing Fowl Behaviour* to monitor if their farm, hatchery and breeder husbandry practices are minimising the risk of feather pecking or cannibalism. These and other checklists, work instructions and scoring sheets indicated by ■ in this publication are available as downloads from www.australianeggs.org.au/for-farmers/animal-care-welfare/.

- Monitoring and managing poultry to minimise feather pecking and cannibalism
- Audit questions for breeders on practices to minimise pecking risk in progeny
- Audit questions for farm managers on husbandry practices to minimise pecking risk

Stress and coping

Pecking behaviour changes in response to poor husbandry practices or environmental factors that increase flock stress levels. How each bird copes with the stressor determines the welfare outcome for the flock. The bird copes either with an innate response, adapts by developing a new behaviour, or does not cope and shows abnormal behaviours.

The degree of stress on the bird depends on the type of stressors, the number of stressors and the severity and duration of each. The bird may cope with one or more stressors but it is often the additional stress which triggers a feather pecking event.

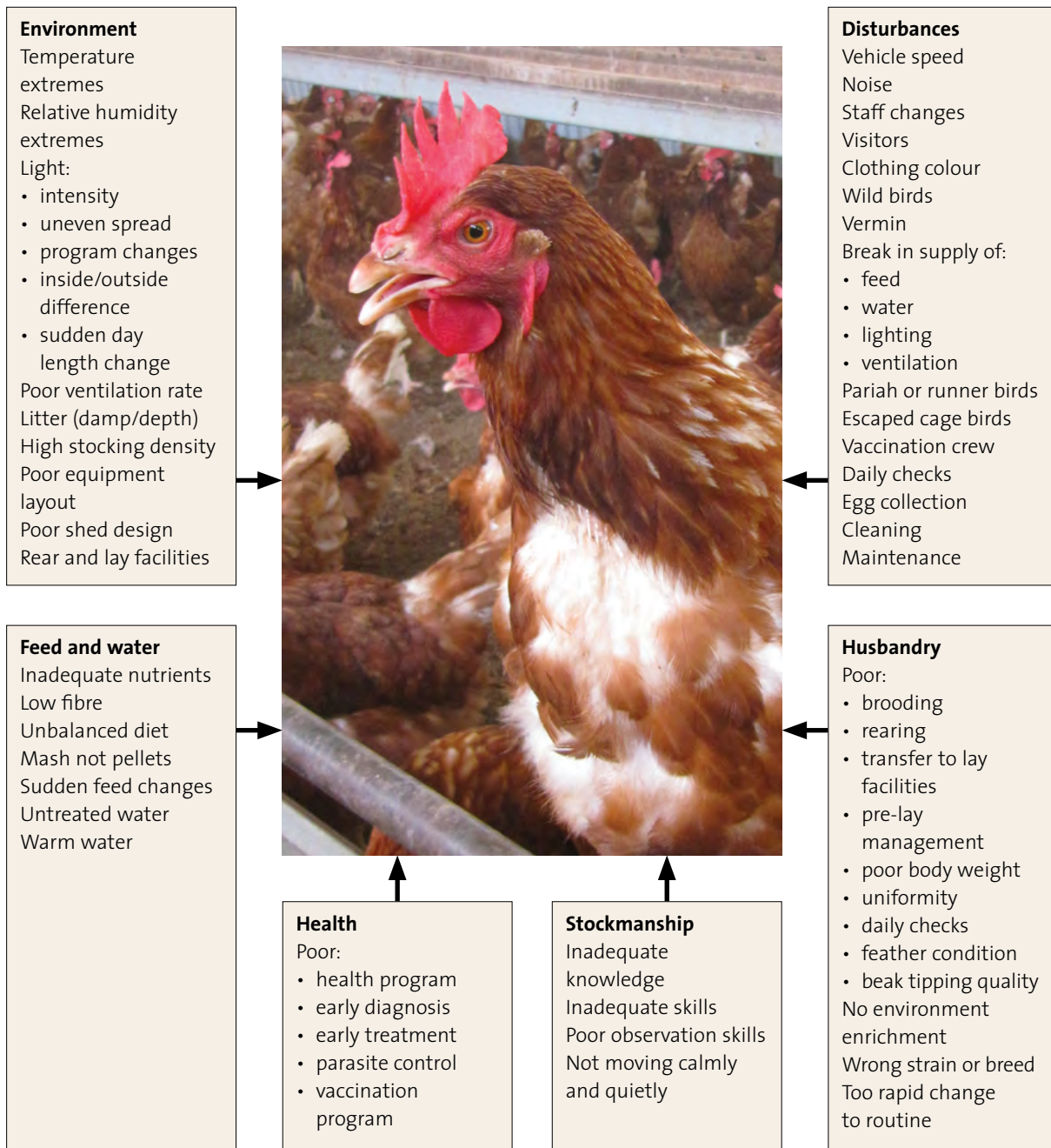
There are stressful times in the flock's life where birds are more prone to develop feather pecking behaviours. Be very attentive at these times:

- the moulting periods during pullet growth
- placement of pullets in the laying facilities
- the prelay period
- during peak lay or egg mass
- other periods of stress such as hot weather
- a disease incidence or parasite infestation (e.g. red mite).

There are a multitude of husbandry practices and environmental factors which can become stressors if not managed correctly. The stressors may also affect flock welfare, health, egg production and growth.



Stressors than can lead to severe or targeted feather pecking



The best wellbeing outcome for pullets and hens occurs when husbandry reduces stressors and when pecking is detected early.

Plumage cover

The condition of plumage or feather cover gives an indication of the well-being of the bird or flock. Feather condition and feather loss are affected by the environment where the poultry live, as well as the standard of management and nutrition, rate of growth or egg production, type of housing and equipment, disease, pecking behaviour and occurrence of a moult.

Moulting

Birds moult to replace old feathers with new ones. It is uncomfortable and may trigger feather pecking. Feather loss during a moult is symmetrical. Unlike the more random feather loss from pecking, the same group of feathers is shed on both sides of the body during a moult.

The bird usually retains its general shape when moulting even though the plumage appears thin or uneven. Bald spots are typical of feather pecking, injury or parasitic infection.

Moults during rearing

Moulting during rearing occurs at four to five weeks, eight to nine weeks and 13–15 weeks of age. If the 13-week moult starts late, it is a sign that the pullets are poorly grown and uneven in size.

Seasonal moult

Laying hens housed without artificial lighting or in the wild, undergo a seasonal moult triggered by a shortening day length. It may take up to four months for mature birds to replenish all their feathers. In the southern hemisphere chickens hatched from July to September will continue laying through their first winter without moulting.

Partial moult

Stress from hot weather, feed or management issues can induce a partial moult. This is often seen as a rapid loss of neck feathers with a decrease in egg production or growth rate. A partial moult often occurs in the latter stages of lay.

Induced moult

Induced moulting is a practice used to extend the length of lay. Its use is declining because of the high productivity and longer lay period of today's layer strains. A moult can be induced by feeding layers a diet that does not support egg production yet is sufficient for body maintenance. This leads to a rapid replacement of feathers and a temporary halt to egg production. When birds start to lay again shell quality is improved and birds lay for longer.

Feather wear

Mature feathers have completed their growth and become 'dead' structures which are gradually worn, broken, fall out or are pulled out. Feather condition and feather loss is affected by:

- flock age
- the environment in which the poultry live
- the standard of nutrition
- the amount of fibre in the diet
- growth or egg production rate
- housing type and equipment
- the health status of the flock
- pecking behaviour
- preening activity.

Do not confuse feather damage from pecking with damage from housing or equipment. Damage from equipment can be quite varied in a flock. Dust bathing also causes feather wear.

In caged birds:

- feathers are lost on a bird's chest or neck from rubbing against the front wires of the cage or the lip of the feed trough
- wing feathers are damaged when a bird rubs against the sides of cages.

In barn and free range birds:

- chest and neck feathers are damaged when a bird rubs on feed troughs that are poorly designed or set at an incorrect height
- some birds stand at a feed trough and follow the moving feed with their head to get particular bits of mash. This may lead to feather wear on the neck, chest or head or may cause injury to the skin on the bird's head.

It is important to know the difference between moulting, normal feather wear, equipment wear on feathers and feather damage from abnormal pecking behaviour.

Signs of feather wear, pecking and moulting in poultry		
Equipment wear	Feather pecking	Moulting
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Areas of broken and damaged feathers • Feathers in the affected area are eventually worn away 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Loss of feathers on the head, back and base of tail (silver backing) and vent areas • Patches of whole feathers are removed often leaving blood or fluid at the follicle site • Broken feathers • Sometimes skin damage • Severe feather pecking usually starts on the back or at the base of the tail • Bare areas of skin are prime areas for attack and cannibalism by other birds especially if there is a scratch or wound in these areas 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • None of the signs seen in equipment wear or feather pecking • Feathers are lost evenly in groups on both sides of the body • Bird retains its general body shape even though feather cover appears thin • Partial moults are often associated with a dip in egg production or growth rate • Full moults usually caused by decreasing day length

Poor feather cover increases the risk of sunburn for outdoor birds and they eat more, particularly in winter, because they do not have good insulation. More energy from the feed is used to maintain body temperature particularly in cold weather.

Ineffective beak tipping may contribute to feather loss, as poorly tipped birds are able to firmly grab feathers or inflict damage with their sharper beaks.

If a large number of birds have poor feathering it is a sign that the flock is experiencing stress and/or feather wear from equipment.

Scoring plumage condition

Visually assessing plumage or feather damage in a flock gives an estimate of:

- plumage condition
- feather pecking status
- feather damage from equipment
- loss of feather cover from a partial moult or disease stress
- the long-term effectiveness of beak tipping.

A simple easy to apply on-farm scoring system used regularly adds to the history of the flock and may be useful when solving problems or evaluating flock performance.

Score	Condition	Plumage description	Flight feather condition
1	GOOD	Minor deterioration of feathers, otherwise good feathering with skin completely covered by feathers.	Intact
2	AVERAGE	Clear deterioration of feathers with some feather loss. There may be small areas of bare skin visible.	Broken or separated
3	POOR	Heavily damaged feathers with small to large areas of feather loss. Small to large areas of bare skin often visible.	Many missing or broken

Score 1: **GOOD**. Typically seen in hens 16 to 40 weeks of age.

Score 2: **AVERAGE**. Typically seen in hens 30 to 80 weeks of age.

Score 3: **POOR**. Seen in hens of any age. Poor feathering is an indicator of feather pecking or abnormal deterioration in feather condition caused by management practices, environment, equipment and nutrition.

During and after scoring ask ‘What is the cause of the feather loss or damage?’ Is it due to:

- normal feather wear including dust bathing wear
- housing and equipment
- pecking
- moulting.

The feather score for pullets at the time of transfer to the laying facilities is a good indicator of how well they were reared and also gives a base line for comparison with future feather scores.

When pullets arrive on the layer farm the feather score should be good. A feather pecking ‘at risk’ flock can show feather damage as early as 17 weeks. If a flock reaches 40 weeks of age with good feathering, hens generally maintain relatively good plumage until depopulation unless there is an abnormal stressor such as hot weather or disease.

Feather condition and behaviour scoring sheets

A scoring sheet for monitoring feather condition, pecking behaviour, flock vocalisation and flightiness is available as a download. It includes photos with descriptions so feather condition can be easily identified. This can also be used to develop the stockhand’s skills in observing and detecting changes in feather condition and flock behaviour. (Print in colour for best results.)

- Feathering and behaviour score sheet

Monitoring behaviour

Monitor the flock's behaviour regularly and as part of the daily flock checks. Check for:

- pecking
- flightiness
- flock noises.

Pecking

Get to know the different poultry behaviours. Stop, let the flock settle, look and listen. It is difficult to see birds actually pecking. But you can hear them—pecked birds will give a squawk.

Learn to distinguish between:

- social behaviour used to establish 'peck order' e.g. pecking at other birds or feathers, chasing other birds or fighting
- pecking, which includes pulling out feathers, pecking at combs, wounds or the vent area.

Both behaviours are often signalled by a loud vocalisation, or squawk, and squatting.

Flightiness

Aim for a stable, non-flighty flock. Birds can be startled and become flighty by a change in the colour of workers' clothing, the number of workers/people in the pen, general loud noise, noisy equipment, rodent activity, predators on the range and wild birds in sheds.

Flocks become flighty if they aren't used to humans being around them. From early in rearing, stockhands should regularly walk through the shed slowly and calmly avoiding large, loud movements such as clapping at birds or shouting.

Is the flock?

Calm. In general, the birds appear undisturbed by your presence and may actively approach you.

Cautious. The birds appear somewhat disturbed or concerned by your presence but do not appear overly alarmed.

Flighty. The birds appear actively alarmed by your presence, will move away, and vocalise loudly. They will take time to calm down. Flighty behaviour may cause smothering in opposite areas of the shed.

Flightiness in the shed will be reflected on the range. A flock can become flighty from the environment and events on the range as well as being affected by events in or around the shed.

Flock sounds

A flock sounds different if something has disrupted the birds. Get to know the different sounds and sound volume that a flock makes. Do you know what a calm flock sounds like? How does the sound change when the birds are given feed? What is the sound of hens waiting for access to an empty nest box? When they've laid an egg? Do you know if a predator is around? Or if there is pecking?

Observe and record changes in behaviour on the daily rounds.

Managing the risk of feather pecking or cannibalism

Preventing feather pecking and cannibalism is about managing risk and maintaining bird welfare, performance and farm sustainability.

The best wellbeing outcome for pullets and hens comes from using farm management strategies and husbandry practices that:

- maintain feather cover and condition
- manage or reduce the number of stressors
- reduce the risk of feather pecking and targeted pecking
- detect feather pecking early
- investigate the possible causes of a pecking event
- implement practices to help the birds cope during a pecking event.

Each farm needs a strategy to manage the risk of a feather pecking event. The strategy should include:

1. Managing the 'stressors' likely to cause severe pecking and cannibalism.
2. Infrared beak treat day old replacement chickens with the treatment 'prescription' suitable for the environment in which the birds will spend their life.

If the strategy is successful, most flocks will complete their life without a serious pecking incident. Anecdotally, well managed free range farms applying this strategy are now experiencing a feather pecking event in every fifth or sixth flock.

A successful strategy will ensure most flocks complete their life without a pecking incident.

Important management practices to minimise the risk of pecking

Lighting

Birds are more likely to peck at feathers and vents in brighter light because the feathers and bare skin are more visible. Higher and variable light intensities tend to increase the nervousness of the hens and result in pecking and feather loss. Avoid sudden increases in light intensity or day length. Head flicking, vent, tail, head and body pecking are the behaviours most closely associated with an increase in light intensity.

Use the breeders recommended light program for the strain used.

In naturally ventilated housing for layers, set light levels for non-daylight hours at the light intensity occurring in the shed during daylight. This reduces the abrupt shifts in light intensity between shed, verandah and range.

There should be even light throughout the shed and no light beams shining directly into nests. Bright spots or areas of shadow can result in injurious pecking. Light speckling in the shed can stress birds and cause smothering, mortality and feather pecking.

The entrance to the nest should be well lit but the interior should be darkened, although initial higher light levels inside the nesting area improve nest acceptance by pullets coming into lay. Variations in light intensity around nest boxes can cause competition for boxes in darker areas and lead to pecking.

Pullet rearing

Rear well—lay well. The rearing period establishes the hen's behaviour and how well it will perform during lay.

- A flock with overweight and underweight pullets and with poor uniformity at time of transfer has an increased risk of feather pecking and targeted pecking.
- Feather pecking during pullet rearing will carry through to the laying period.
- Off target body weight and poor uniformity increase the risk of cloacal (vent) haemorrhage which leads to vent pecking during lay.
- The environment and management of pullets during the later rearing stage influences the incidence of feather pecking during lay.
- Dry friable litter of sufficient depth during rearing encourages dust bathing behaviour in pullets.
- If the pullet flock is not moulting uniformly by 13 weeks of age, the flock will be under weight or lacking uniformity. This increases the risk of pecking during lay.
- Rearing pullets in facilities similar to the laying facilities reduces the pecking risk.

Environmental enrichment

Stimulate bird activity and relieve boredom by providing enrichment in the shed and on the range. Birds are more likely to use enrichment devices if they are introduced to them early in rearing. Hens tend to use enrichment devices less after they reach the age of 40 weeks.

Stockmanship

Being able to observe a flock's feather condition and behaviour is an essential part of a stockhand's skill set. Welfare is improved and potentially adverse behaviours can be managed if the stockhand is able to observe and predict when a flock is under stress.

Stockhands should know what is normal for the age of the flock. This increases the likelihood of early detection of a change in behaviour or plumage condition.

Stockhands need to be trained to observe and monitor the birds and shed conditions:

- flightiness
- pecking behaviour (sound and movement)
- feather prevalence (on cage floor, on ground and/or manure belts)
- feather condition of the birds during daily welfare checks
- beak shape and condition.

Use the resources in *Managing fowl behaviour* for scoring and monitoring to develop stockhands skills.

Managing a feather pecking event

Detecting feather pecking early as well as putting in place known control practices are critical to bringing the event under control. It also minimises the risk of social transmission of pecking. If not detected early and managed well, pecking often results in damage and bleeding which can lead to targeted pecking.

Managing poultry if there are signs of feather pecking and cannibalism in a flock

Producers can use the checklists and work instructions to help manage disruptive stressors.

- Monitoring and managing poultry to minimise feather pecking and cannibalism checklist
- Feather pecking and cannibalism event work instructions

Managing a targeted pecking outbreak

If feather pecking has advanced to targeted or injurious levels despite all the preventative measures being applied, **act immediately** by implementing control practices and check any practices that were put in place to manage previous feather pecking events have all been implemented. **Severe feather pecking may move very quickly to a targeted pecking event** depending on the nature of the stressors.

Pecking can be socially transmitted *quickly*. If victimised birds are left in the flock, they vocalise, squawk, cower or jump. This disruptive behaviour encourages the birds doing the pecking to continue as well attracting more birds to join in. A severe pecking event can be managed by removing both the birds instigating the pecking and the injured birds. Do this as soon as you first notice it — now, not tomorrow!

Use the checklists and work instructions mentioned in this document if there are signs of targeted pecking and cannibalism in a flock.

If these measures fail to bring the targeted pecking under control consider **what's best for the bird**.

The chosen action must be acted on quickly to reduce injurious pecking and cannibalism and protect the welfare of the flock. Consider flock age, hen welfare and do a 'what if' on likely egg production, mortality, costs and returns. The choices are:

- keep the flock going by managing the event
- cull the flock.

If the targeted pecking cannot be brought under control than either cull the flock or implement an emergency or rescue beak trim with the hot blade method. This requires veterinary or poultry husbandry expert recommendations as described in the Australian Model Code of Practice for the Welfare of Animals – Domestic Poultry 4th Edition (2001). Applying a rescue trim may not bring the targeted pecking event under control and the flock may have to be culled.

Managing a targeted pecking event can be very demanding and frustrating but many outbreaks are able to be managed and do not require a rescue or emergency trim.

Beak tipping

Removing a portion of the bird's beak makes it more difficult for a bird to grab hold of feathers of another bird and either pull them out or break them. Removing the 'hook' from the upper beak makes it more difficult for the 'pecker' to cause injury to another bird.

Definitions to describe beak tipping

- **Beak tipping**
Removal of a portion of the upper and lower beak, or upper beak only by any method.
- **Beak treatment (IRBT)**
Treatment of the beak of day old chickens using infrared technology resulting in a portion of the beak usually sloughing off by two to three weeks of age.
- **Beak trimming**
Removal of a portion of the beak, using the hot blade technique at any age. At least two-thirds of the original length must be left.

When thinking about whether or not to beak tip a flock consider **what's best for the bird**. The long-term welfare benefit for the bird in reducing the risk of injury from severe pecking or cannibalism outweighs the short-term discomfort from tipping beaks in most cases.

Infrared beak treatment (IRBT) and trimming with a hot blade are the two commonly used tipping methods. Hot blade trimming has been replaced by IRBT in most developed nations and is gradually being replaced in other countries because it is more precise and there are fewer after effects on the chickens. Farmers see IRBT as a more acceptable and welfare friendly method of beak tipping.

Infrared beak treatment

The characteristics of IRBT are:

- it is a non-invasive beak tipping technique
- it uses advanced and precise technology
- an infrared lamp delivers an energy pulse which treats the hard outer layer of the beak and a pre-determined amount of the underlying softer tissue
- the beak outer layer remains intact, protecting the treated soft tissue underneath after treatment
- growth of the beak continues after treatment except at the growth site of the beak hook
- the aim is to control beak length and shape over the life of the bird
- the chicken is able to use its beak normally after treatment
- there are no long-term or persistent neuromas (a mass of nerves that sprout and form a bundle after a nerve is cut)
- within a week the beak tip starts to soften and at two to three weeks the sharp tip of the beak sloughs or falls off
- the better beak shape achieved leads to more uniform flocks.

The IRBT technique is much more precise than hot blade trimming and manages which part of the beak will grow and its growth rate. It is also incorrect to apply the rule of removing no more than one-third to infrared treated beaks as the method used has different effects on the beak.

The amount of beak treatment or ‘prescription’ applied is determined by **what’s best for the bird in the environment in which it will live.**

The criteria that determine the IRBT ‘prescription’ are:

- chick type (meat, layer, breeder)
- strain or breed
- housing type and ventilation method
- farm latitude. The closer a farm is to the equator the higher the outdoor light intensity and daily or seasonal temperature range
 - brighter light illuminates feathers more and increases pecking risk
 - higher temperature increases environmental stress on the flock.

Give the chick only as much infrared beak treatment as needed—no more.

Assessing the quality of infrared beak treatment

The chick quality and application of treatment is assessed at the hatchery prior to delivery. Follow this up by scoring beak shape and condition on farm:

- at 28 days age
- at transfer of the pullets to the laying facilities
- when a bout of pecking occurs
- towards the end of lay if there are concerns about the beak shape.

Scoring provides information which can be linked to flock history. This enables evaluation of the treatment prescription and how effective it was. It is best practice to discuss with the hatchery any concerns about the prescription used (the beak shape and length) or quality of treatment.

- Infrared beak treatment beak shape scoring sheets

Care of chicks on delivery to the rearing farm

Some pointers for brooding IRBT chickens are:

- IRBT chicks will drink and eat within two hours of placement in the brooder
 - provide the chick with easy access to and adequate quantities of feed and water
 - use open water troughs, cup drinkers or 360 degree activated nipples so that chicks can drink more easily.
- Work instructions for placement of and monitoring chickens after infrared beak treatment

Hot blade trimming

Trimming beaks with a hot blade was first developed in early 1940s as a way of managing feather pecking and cannibalism. The heated blade cauterises or seals the cut, preventing bleeding and infection. Hot blade trimming is used where IRBT is not available, wrong IRBT ‘prescription’ was applied or as a last resort when managing a feather pecking or cannibalism event.

Skilled and properly trained operators are able to apply the correct technique and achieve uniform beaks and accuracy of trim. The bird must be held firmly and securely supported before, during and after trimming. The maximum length of beak removed is one-third of the original beak. Regrowth will occur if less than one-third of beak is removed.

- Farm manager and trim team leader checklist for hot blade beak trimming a poultry flock

Managing poultry after hot blade trimming

Check hot blade trimmed birds regularly for 10 days after trimming ensuring that they are eating and drinking, and there is no bleeding from the wound or abnormal flock behaviour.

- Birds will take a few hours before they return to feed and a few days to achieve full feed consumption.
- Birds with poorly trimmed beaks will not eat properly.

Adequate feed and water depth needs to be maintained in feeders and drinkers so that birds have every opportunity to eat and drink.

- Work instructions for monitoring poultry after hot blade beak trimming

Assessing quality of trimming

The quality of trim can be assessed by scoring the beak shape, length and imperfections:

- on the day of trim
- at 10–14 days after trimming
- at transfer of pullets to the layer facilities
- when a bout of pecking occurs or flock’s flightiness increases
- towards end of lay if there are concerns about the beak shape.

Use scoring as a tool to improve staff observation skills during flock inspections.

- Scoring sheets for monitoring beaks after trimming with hot blade

Summary

- Feather pecking is a significant management problem for pullet rearers and egg producers.
- Pecking is a natural behaviour which can turn nasty.
- You can help the flock to cope by managing the stressors and reducing the risk of pecking occurring.
- Birds need good plumage cover to reduce the risk of feather pecking.
- Monitor feather cover and flock behaviour in the daily flock checks.
- Beak tipping is an essential part of a farm's strategy to manage the risk from a feather pecking event.
- Rear the pullets well so that their body weight and uniformity are on target.
- Train staff to be observant and recognise the normal behaviour of the flock.
- Maintain a good standard of stockmanship on the farm.
- If a feather pecking or cannibalism event occurs act quickly to implement control practices and minimise social transmission.

Managing fowl behaviour is about doing **what is best for the bird for its whole life.**

What does Penny the flock leader in backyard and farm flocks have to say?

We do not like change.

We do not like disruption.

We have high standards.

We like to have things to stimulate us.

If we get stressed we may take it out on our friends.

So please help us cope by managing the things that stress us.

