

MONITORING AND MANAGING POULTRY TO MINIMISE FEATHER PECKING AND CANNIBALISM



A **checklist** for farm managers to use when there:

- is evidence of feather pecking or cannibalism in a flock
- or as a check of farm practices for managing disruptive stressors to minimise the risk of an occurrence of feather pecking.

Most of the items to be checked should be included in daily or other checklists used as part of the farm quality assurance program.

Welfare codes, standards or guidelines place responsibility on the farm owner, manager and staff to minimise feather pecking and cannibalism in poultry flocks under their care.

Place a tick as applicable in the left hand box.

Monitor bird behaviour and pecking	
<input type="checkbox"/>	Staff walk through the flock calmly, quietly and consistently.
<input type="checkbox"/>	During peak egg production and peak egg mass.
<input type="checkbox"/>	Following periods of disturbance from vehicles and other farm noises and events.
<input type="checkbox"/>	Following vaccination or other procedures on the flock.
<input type="checkbox"/>	If there are changes in staff tending to the flock or when visitors enter the shed.
<input type="checkbox"/>	During variable weather conditions (high temperature/humidity/wind/storms).
<input type="checkbox"/>	While eggs are being collected.
<input type="checkbox"/>	During routine cleaning and maintenance in the shed.
<input type="checkbox"/>	When the egg belt and manure belt are being run.
<input type="checkbox"/>	When wild birds, reptiles or rodents get into shed or when birds escape from cages.
<input type="checkbox"/>	When hens are moved to another cage.
<input type="checkbox"/>	When light intensity is increased or length of light period is changed.
<input type="checkbox"/>	When birds are moved from controlled light housing to uncontrolled (natural) lighting.
<input type="checkbox"/>	Following husbandry mishaps such as breaks in feed or water supply or light failure.
Stocking density	
<input type="checkbox"/>	Recommended stocking density is used in cages, barn sheds and free range systems.
<input type="checkbox"/>	Stocking density is reduced if pecking is a problem.
Body weight	
<input type="checkbox"/>	Body weight is checked regularly to meet breeder guidelines.
<input type="checkbox"/>	The flock is uniform in weight.

Place a tick as applicable in the left hand box.

Diet	
	Diet is optimum for growth or production stage of bird and housing system.
	Mash is fed to increase foraging behaviour and reduce feather pecking.
	Ration changes are made gradually.
	Dietary fibre is 3.5–4.0 per cent.
Litter	
	Litter is clean, dry and friable and the appropriate depth.
Enrichment	
	Non-cage shed floor is enriched with scratch grain, straw bales, pecking blocks, etc.
	The range is enriched with windbreaks, shelterbelts, crop rotations, shade and sand baths.
	Birds are introduced to enrichment devices during pullet rearing.
Abrasives	
	An abrasive material is fixed to the base of non-chain feed troughs.
	Abrasive material is fitted to non-perforated egg baffles of cages.
	Claws are checked for bluntness.
Parent stock	
	Chicks sourced from different breeder or donor flocks are reared in separate groups. If not possible ensure there is adequate feed and drinker space, correct temperatures and good husbandry practices applied.
	A strain with low levels of cannibalism is selected.
	A strain with short claws is selected.
Brooding	
	All birds are able to access food and water.
	Drinker and feeder height is correct.
	Use open water troughs, cup drinkers or 360 degree activated nipples for beak treated chickens.
	Litter material is dry at chick placement.
	Vitamins and electrolytes are given in drinking water.
Rearing management	
	Birds are housed in similar facilities from day old to end of lay.
	Perches are provided during rearing.
	Shed equipment runs quietly.
	Recommended feeding and drinking space is available to each bird.
	Sick and unthrifty birds are culled.
Pullet transfer	
	Pullets are moved to the laying house at 15–17 weeks.
	Vitamins and probiotics are provided in the drinker water three days before and after placement.
	Birds are transported at night to keep them calm.
	Extra feed and water is provided soon after placement.

Place a tick as applicable in the left hand box.

Prelay hens in cages	
	Laying house temperature is the same as the rearing shed at time of transfer.
	Light intensity is increased for seven days after placement.
	Pullets are fed a pre-lay diet until first egg is laid.
Prelay hens in barn and free range	
	Birds are not disturbed when first placed in laying facilities.
	Lights are left on for 24 hours after placement.
Layer hens in cages	
	Monitor feed intake, body weight, egg weight and egg numbers throughout lay.
	Pullets are not stimulated with light until breeder target body weight is achieved.
	Monitor feather cover throughout lay.
	Maintain correct stocking density.
	Ambient temperature in layer shed is 18–27°C
	Provide adequate ventilation at all times.
	Old fluorescent tubes are replaced as the light pattern emitted during flickering becomes asymmetrical with age and is likely to induce feather pecking.
	Keep light intensity at 5 lux with a minimum of 0.5 lux at feeder level in controlled environment sheds.
Layer hens in non-cage facilities	
	Provide sufficient substrate to enable birds to carry out regular comfort behaviours (resting, sleeping, preening, scratching and dust bathing).
	Monitor body weight and uniformity by weighing birds regularly.
	There is even light intensity in shed.
	Birds are socialised by stock attendants walking through the shed at least four times daily soon after placement.
	When pecking is a problem stocking density is reduced.
	Strains of layer hens are suited to non-cage housing.
	Laying facilities match rearing facilities.
	Floor eggs are picked up regularly and consistently.
	Birds are protected against climate extremes.
	Non-cage birds are regularly treated for internal parasites.
	Birds are protected against disease using an appropriate health and vaccination program.
Range management	
	Birds have easy access to and from the range.
	Pullets are introduced to the verandah or range at 18–20 weeks (five per cent production) or after peak egg mass.
	Pullets introduced to the verandah are given access to the range one week later.

Place a tick as applicable in the left hand box.

Lighting	
	Pullets for free range egg production are reared with exposure to natural light.
	Low light intensity (3–5 lux) is used from three weeks prior to transfer in controlled environment sheds.
	Controlled environment shed is light proofed to avoid outside light leaking in.
	Sunlight does not illuminate the floor and nest boxes in naturally ventilated housing.
	Sudden increases in light intensity and photo period (or day length) are avoided.
	Abrupt shifts in light intensity between shed, verandah and range are reduced.
	In naturally ventilated sheds light intensity is 10–15 lux from four to six weeks of age through to 14 weeks and increased to daylight levels that the birds will experience in the shed during lay.
Nest boxes	
	Hens can freely access nest boxes.
	The entrance to the nest is well lit.
	The interior of nest boxes is darkened.
	Individual nest boxes or nesting areas are not overcrowded.
Bird health	
	Unthrifty, small, odd coloured and pariah birds are culled.
	Dead birds are removed daily.
	Flock is treated for internal parasites and ectoparasites.
	Birds treated for wounds are separated from the flock.
	Predators, rodents and flies are controlled and wild bird entry into sheds is prevented.
	Birds with vent trauma or wounds from cannibalism are treated or culled.
Daily health and welfare checks	
	Bird behaviour is normal (stance, flightiness, sounds).
	Mortality is normal.
	There is no overcrowding.
	Bird stress is minimised.
	Feed and water is available to all birds and consumption is normal.
	Litter is dry and friable and there are no wet patches in the litter.
	Ventilation is adequate at all times.
	There is no smell of ammonia.
	There is no excessive dust.
	Ventilation and shed temperature are ideal.
	Light is uniform throughout the shed.
	Alarm systems are working.
	Cooling and heating systems are working.

Farmers and breeder managers are also encouraged to undertake the following as they may contribute to reducing feather pecking and cannibalism.

- Train staff in poultry husbandry skills.
- Handle birds calmly and gently when crated, carried or held.
- Check fibre, protein, mineral, vitamins and trace elements in diet.
- Use a phase feeding program based on rate of lay.
- Use high energy diets for free range birds.
- Remove poisonous plants from the range.
- Moulting birds using a high fibre diet.
- Provide hard grit and shell grit where required.
- Check there is no evidence of birds refusing feed.
- Position feeders, drinkers and nest boxes appropriately and correctly.
- Prevent muddy conditions on the range.
- Check beak and claw abrasives regularly.
- Pre-warm brooding shed before chickens arrive.
- Provide additional feed and water at placement of chickens.
- Acclimatise birds to all shed noises, equipment and activities.
- Provide ramps to allow birds to access shed from outside runs where pop-holes are high.
- Provide ramps for young birds to move from litter to slats.
- Monitor shed temperature, water and feed consumption.
- Check accuracy of time clocks.
- Check feather condition regularly.
- Prevent access to runs during inclement weather.
- Keep noise levels to a minimum.