AUDIT QUESTIONS AND IMPLICATIONS EGG FARMERS AND BREEDERS NEED TO CONSIDER

Critical questions are shaded (NA = not applicable). Place a tick as applicable.

On-farm questions (rearing and laying)	Yes	No	NA	Implications
Have staff been trained in husbandry skills?				Untrained staff with poor attitude can stress birds and cause feather pecking.
Do staff walk through the flock calmly, quietly and consistently when checking birds?				Ensuring staff walk through the flock calmly, quietly and consistently helps to reduce fear and stress of the flock when interacting with people.
Are floor eggs picked up regularly and consistently throughout the day during the first weeks of lay?				Floor eggs can encourage birds to group together leading to smothering, injuries and feather pecking and stress in the flock.
Are injured birds and pariah birds removed from the flock as soon as possible?				Injured birds and pariah birds can attract other birds to peck at them, encouraging social transmission of feather pecking within the flock.
Do you remove dead birds from the shed as soon as possible?				Birds will peck at the carcass which can encourage feather pecking at other birds.
Are there any unthrifty birds in the flock (underweight or in poor health)?				Birds which are in poor health and/or underweight should be culled as they can attract other birds to peck at them.
Is pullet weight at point of lay within 15 per cent of breeder's target weight?				Pullet body weight that is more than 15 per cent below the breed standard at point of lay is associated with a three fold increase in cloacal haemorrhage. About 10 per cent of these underweight pullets can have severe chronic cloacal damage which also attracts pecking by other birds.
Is the flock's body weight uniform?				Large variations in body weight can result in feather pecking and cannibalism.
Is light intensity kept low (3–5 lux) in controlled environment housing during rearing and laying?				Keeping light intensity as low as 3 lux during rearing and less than 5 lux during lay reduces the risk of pecking.
Is light intensity managed in open-sided sheds where birds are exposed to natural light during rearing and lay?				Maintaining a light intensity of 10–15 lux from four to six weeks through to 14 weeks and then increasing to the daylight levels that the birds will experience in the shed during lay reduces the risk of pecking.
Is the ingress of direct sunlight or bright light managed in naturally ventilated/ open-sided sheds?				Areas of bright light in the shed can induce feather pecking.
Is there uneven light intensity around nest boxes in open-sided sheds?				Variations in light intensity around nest boxes can cause competition for boxes in darker areas and result in pecking.

Place a tick as applicable.

On-farm questions (rearing and laying)	Yes	No	NA	Implications
Is the light intensity in nest boxes low?				Birds are attracted to peck at the reproductive tract exposed during egg laying. Inflamed cloacae from enteritis, spontaneous cloacal haemorrhage or a bulging cloaca at the onset of the first egg also attract pecking.
Are abrupt shifts in light intensity between shed/verandah and range areas managed?				Abrupt shifts in light intensity can trigger feather pecking and cannibalism.
Is the litter maintained in a dry friable state?				Damp litter reduces bird comfort and may lead to severe and aggressive pecking.
Is light speckling minimised in the shed?				Variation in light speckling in the shed can stress birds and cause smothering, mortality and feather pecking.
Is the diet formulated correctly for the age of birds?				Deficiencies in protein and sulphur amino acids can result in feather pecking.
Are ration changes introduced to the flock gradually?				Changing from one diet to another quickly can stress the birds and induce feather pecking.
Is a mash diet fed to the birds?				Mash diets keep birds occupied by increasing feeding time and reducing feather pecking activity.
Is adequate insoluble fibre included in the diet?				Additional fibre gives the birds a calm feeling and reduces the desire to peck at feathers.
Is indoor stocking density correct according to the current welfare code, standard or guidelines?				High stocking density may result in increased pecking and cannibalism.
Is good quality litter provided in non-slatted floor sheds or sections of sheds?				Good quality litter keeps birds occupied. Dust bathing and litter scratching reduces feather pecking activity.
Is the minimum amount of paper used under brooders for chicks at placement?				Excess paper causes a mat of manure, restricts dust bathing and foraging behaviour. Chicks may engage in feather/toe pecking instead.
Is there a smell of ammonia or high dust levels in the shed?				Poor air quality can result in an increase in pecking activities.
Are noise levels kept to a minimum inside and outside the shed?				High noise levels can stress birds and encourage bouts of pecking.
Are birds exposed to extreme weather events?				Extreme weather events such as lightning can stress birds and encourage bouts of pecking.
Is environmental enrichment provided to birds to help keep them occupied during rearing and lay?				Good enrichment in sheds and on the range during rearing and lay keeps birds occupied and reduces feather pecking activity. If enrichment is used during rearing, birds are more likely to use enrichment during lay.
Are birds causing the targeted pecking removed as soon as they are observed?				The presence of aggressive birds can result in bouts of pecking and cannibalism. If they are not removed quickly social transmission of pecking may occur.
Are the birds being pecked at during targeted pecking removed as soon as they are observed?				If left in the flock these birds will vocalise, squawk, cower or jump which encourages the offenders to continue pecking and attracts more birds to join in.

Place a tick as applicable.

On-farm questions (rearing and laying)	Yes	No	NA	Implications
Is all equipment including nest boxes, feeders and drinkers operating and set up correctly in the shed?				Breakdown or poor layout of equipment can stress birds and cause bouts of pecking.
Are nest boxes readily accessed by birds via steps and landing board?				Birds having difficulty reaching nest boxes may be pecked at by other birds.
Are nest boxes regularly checked for dead and broody birds and are they removed?				Carcasses and broody birds are pecked at by other birds in the nest, which stimulates further pecking at other birds.
Is the beak shape and beak condition of infrared beak treated chicks checked when placed in brooder on delivery and then again at four weeks of age?				Birds that are not adequately beak treated will engage in feather pecking and cannibalism.
Is the beak condition (length, shape and imperfections) of hot blade trimmed pullets assessed at 10–14 days after trimming or at placement in laying facilities if purchased as started pullets?				Poor beak condition increases the risk of feather pecking.
Is the feather cover of pullets checked when birds are placed in the layer shed?				Poor feather cover at transfer to laying shed indicates pecking problems during rearing which could continue during the laying period.
Is the condition of plumage cover assessed during daily checks, and scored regularly?				Poor plumage cover increases the risk of severe pecking.
Is flock behaviour assessed during daily checks, and scored regularly?				Changes in flock behaviour indicate that feather pecking or targeted pecking is occurring.
Is flock behaviour monitored following vaccination or other procedures, variable weather events (high temperature or relative humidity or storms)?				Abnormal events can trigger feather pecking.
Is flock behaviour monitored following wild birds, reptiles or rodent entry into the shed?				Abnormal events can trigger feather pecking.
Is flock behaviour monitored following incursions by wild dogs or foxes?				Abnormal events can trigger feather pecking.
Does the housing system, equipment type and layout match that used in the rearing facilities?				Differences between the rearing and laying facilities can stress the flock increasing the risk of feather pecking.
Are the temperature, humidity, type of lighting, ventilation, cooling and air quality similar to the rearing shed following transfer to laying facilities?				Differences in temperature and conditions between the sheds can trigger feather pecking.
Are the birds socialised during rear by regular movement of stock hands in the shed and introduction of sounds likely to encountered in the laying shed?				A calmer less flighty flock reduces the risk of feather pecking.
Do you monitor bird behaviour following less frequent activities on farm which can stress birds (maintenance of chain feeders, ventilation and cooling systems, replacing light bulbs, flushing water lines etc.)?				Abnormal events can trigger feather pecking.