

MANAGING A FEATHER LOSS PROBLEM

-  **PREVENT.** Try all preventative measures (use the advice in this guide).
-  **INVESTIGATE.** Find out the possible causes. Have there been any changes to your set-up, routines or feed? How is this flock different from previous flocks? Do the hens have enough to keep them occupied? Keeping records of feather loss helps you compare between flocks.
-  **GET ADVICE.** Ask your vet, fieldstaff, feed rep. and for Soil Association or Freedom Food members, contact the Welfare Outcomes Advisor: 0117 314 5174 animalwelfareadvisor@assurewel.org
-  **IN AN EMERGENCY.** Consult your vet. As a last resort, consider lowering light levels, using coloured light bulbs or painting existing light bulbs (green has been shown to help). This should be for a short time only, with ongoing use of other possible solutions.

Beak trimming: Producers are urged to keep hens without beak trimming by 2016 (Defra proposed date for a legal ban) and preferably as soon as possible. Use of this advice guide and other resources should help achieve good feather cover and welfare with non-beak trimmed birds. After 10 days of age hens can only legally be beak trimmed under the authorisation of a veterinary surgeon for emergency welfare reasons due to severe feather pecking or cannibalism. Routine beak trimming is not allowed under organic standards.

ASSESS YOUR FLOCK

Regularly monitor and record feather cover and aggression as part of your Veterinary Health and Welfare Plan. Review with your vet, assurance scheme and company field-staff.

SCORE FEATHER COVER Score at least **50 birds** from different areas of house/range for two areas:

- the **back/rump** (generally associated with **injurious pecking**)
- the **head/neck** (can be **aggression** or **equipment damage**)

- 0 No/Minimal** = No bare skin visible, no or slight wear, only single feathers lacking
- 1 Slight** = Moderate wear and damaged feathers or two or more adjacent feathers missing with bare skin visible of up to 5cm dimension
- 2 Moderate/Severe** = Bare skin visible of 5cm or more in dimension

MORE ADVICE RESOURCES:

- FeatherWel – putting research knowledge into practice to promote bird welfare: www.featherwel.org
- AssureWel – assessment systems and advice on farm animal welfare measures: www.assurewel.org
- RSPCA welfare standards for laying hens & pullets: www.rspca.org.uk/welfarestandards
- Soil Association standards for laying hens & pullets: www.soilassociation.org/organicstandards
- Guide to the practical management of feather pecking & cannibalism in free range laying hens: www.defra.gov.uk
- SAC Organic technical summary – Preventing & coping with feather pecking: www.sac.ac.uk

Produced by the AssureWel project led by the RSPCA, Soil Association and University of Bristol, and FeatherWel, developed by the University of Bristol, using information from the Bristol Pecking Project. Supported by the British Egg Industry Council.



Feather cover

WHY IT MATTERS

Feather cover is important for:

Temperature regulation, protection from sunburn, dustbathing and preening.

Feather loss can be associated with:

Stress, pain, injury, cannibalism, increased feed requirements and reduced productivity.

ALL LAYING HENS **CAN AND SHOULD** ACHIEVE GOOD FEATHER COVER **THROUGHOUT THEIR LIFE**

CAUSES OF FEATHER LOSS

INJURIOUS FEATHER PECKING (distinct from aggression)

Pulling out of feathers, vent pecking and cannibalism.

Can cause feather loss in any body area, particularly the **back and rump**

- Most common cause of feather loss
- Abnormal behaviour, believed to be redirected foraging behaviour
- Can be a sign of stress or disease in the flock
- May indicate lack of foraging opportunities or inadequate diet

Follow the advice in this guide. Once started, injurious feather pecking can be difficult to stop, so all efforts should be made to prevent and control it.

AGGRESSION

Fighting, aggressive pecking, chasing other birds. Often signalled by loud vocalisation.

Particularly causes feather loss around the **head area**

- Normal behaviour to establish pecking order, but problem at high levels
- Can increase risk of injurious pecking, including cannibalism

Follow the advice in this guide, in particular reduce competition and encourage stable groups.

Other causes of feather loss can include damage to feathers by equipment in the house, especially on the head/neck, and high levels of egg production.

GOOD PRACTICE TO IMPROVE FEATHER COVER

PULLETS

Breed

- Some **breeds** may be more prone to injurious pecking – choose calm, robust breeds and good rangers if free-range

Rearing

- **Talk to your rearer** and visit your pullets, or preferably rear your own
- **Match rear and lay environment** – drinker, feeder and perch types, litter type and quality, slats and facilities on different levels, lights and feeder timing, temperature before transfer
- If free-range, source **pullets given access outside**
- Look for **quality pullets** – calm, robust, uniform in size, at target bodyweight and in good health
- Source from **single breed groups**

Placement in laying house

- **Minimise pullet stress** before, during and after transfer
- **Avoid mixing** established groups at any stage of production
- Allow **access to litter as early as possible**, at least within first 3 days

Point of lay

- Ensure hens **do not come into lay too early or late** – manage lighting appropriately



YOUR SET UP

Housing and facilities

- **Good house design and layout** to allow birds to move around and access facilities easily
- Ensure **perch height** and other equipment avoids risk of vent pecking – 50cm vertical space is recommended
- Consider **increasing space or facilities** to help minimise competition – verandas, feeders, drinkers, perches, nest boxes
- **Prevent equipment causing wear** to feathers

Nest boxes

- If **nest box lighting** is used, limit to mornings for initial nest box training only

Feeders

- **Reduce number of chain feeder runs**, particularly in the middle of the day, to prevent bringing birds in from the range

Range

- Provide **access to range as soon as possible**, at least within first 3 weeks, even if only initially in the afternoon (some schemes require earlier access)
- Actively **encourage all birds to range**, by providing more and varied natural and artificial cover equal to about 20% of range area, with many dustbathing and foraging opportunities
- Consider providing clean **drinking water** on the range, but be careful not to attract wild birds

DAY TO DAY

Litter

- Maintaining **dry, friable litter at all times** is absolutely vital – rotovate, rake, add fresh litter, use super absorbent pelleted bedding for problem areas
- **Ensure good drainage** outside popholes, use stones or grids to wipe hens' feet and prevent rain driving in

Health and biosecurity

- Prevent and control **disease and pest challenges** including red mite
- Avoid dirty puddles on range and use clean boot dips

Enrichment

- Provide items inside to **keep birds interested** – pecking blocks hanging/ on the slats, knotted rope/string, vegetables, plastic bottles, dustbathing boxes, bales of straw/shavings
- For barn systems in particular consider a **veranda** – more space in daytime, natural light and ventilation
- Provide **safe refuges**, resting areas and visual barriers – perches, partitions, areas of varied heights, straw bales

Diet

- **Increase foraging** – use mashed feed, scatter pellets/whole grain/grit evenly on litter
- Provide **extra fibre** in consultation with a feed rep. or nutritionist
- Check **nutrient content** – particularly levels of sodium and balance of essential amino acids
- Minimise, and make gradual, any **changes to diet** in content, taste, texture, energy level, changing from high to low protein

Air quality

- Maintain **good air quality**, low dust and humidity

Inspection and management

- **Inspect calmly and frequently** with a varied routine to help to reduce stress and fearfulness
- With **good stock keeping skills** problems can be recognised and managed as quickly as possible
- **Talk to your vet** about preventing feather loss and review as part of your **Veterinary Health & Welfare Plan**

➤➤ The most common cause of injurious pecking is **CHANGE** – make any changes gradually: in housing, facilities and feed. Pay close attention to birds after sudden changes in weather, sudden noises or bright light.

➤➤ The most successful proven strategy is **QUANTITY** – the more of these different solutions used in combination, the lower the chances of injurious pecking and feather loss.

Members of farm assurance schemes, including organic, should also check standards requirements with the relevant scheme.