

Keeping of laying hens and meat chicken

Submitted December 1996

Summary

Egg- and meat chicken production are the animal production systems that have gained the greatest resemblance to factory management systems in our country. These farming systems are intensive and use high animal densities in controlled atmospheres and a great deal of automation. Laying hens are usually kept in small wire cages, while chickens for slaughter are kept on litter in large halls. The production is efficient, and the prices of eggs and chicken meat have declined relative to other animal products through the last decades.

The Council believes that the aim to reduce production costs has pushed aside considerations for the needs of the animals in an unacceptable way. Hens are active animals with a behavioural pattern close to that of their wild ancestors. The natural behaviour of the animals is taken into consideration only when it directly influences production. The Council believes that consumers should accept higher costs if this can benefit the animals.

In the Council's opinion, neither free range rearing or cage keeping of laying hens (battery hens) are acceptable from an animal welfare perspective. However, the Council believes that there is a difference between cage keeping and free range systems. Today, the standard cages for laying hens significantly limit natural behaviour. In the Council's opinion management systems that limit the animals' natural behaviour to such a degree are unacceptable. It must be an aim, therefore, to eventually discontinue the use of cages for keeping of laying hens. The problems encountered in free range systems, first and foremost aggressive pecking ("cannibalism"), are still too large that this management system can be advised without reservations. The Council asks that the Authorities and the industry encourage and facilitate the establishment of ethically acceptable free range management systems.

There is a need to establish regulations that among other things regulate animal densities for free range laying hens. Research on free range management systems should continue, including work to determine what breeds of hens are most suitable for these systems. The Council does not rule out the possibility that improvements to cages such as fitting these with perches, sand and nest boxes, could make cage keeping of hens acceptable in future.

The Council finds it difficult to accept the high animal densities that commonly occur prior to slaughter in the rearing of meat chicken. The Council recommends that the Authorities establish regulations that among other things regulate animal densities in chicken rearing and that take sufficient consideration for the animals towards the end of the fattening period. It is an ethical dilemma that targeted breeding has resulted in animals with such a great potential for growth that they must be slaughtered early or fed restrictively in order to prevent diseases related to rapid growth.

In general, the Council rejects management systems that depend on denying the animals of access to natural light. If the system cannot tolerate inlet of daylight it is a sign that the rearing environment is poor and needs to be improved. There should be a difference between day and night so that the animals can establish a rhythm. The Council proposes that there should be a system for approval of light management systems.

Alternative slaughtering systems for fowl that do not depend on hanging the animals up while they are still alive for stunning should be evaluated.