

Perching opportunities and characteristics

Problem

If opportunities for perching are thwarted during rearing, adult laying hens will have more difficulties to move around in complex systems, which will increase the risk for floor laying. Perches are essential for roosting at night, resting during the day, and to get away from other birds. Perch unavailability could cause frustration or restlessness, leading consequently to animal welfare problems.

Solution

Provide pullets with access to raised perches during the first 7 days of life at the latest. Perches at rearing and production facilities should be as similar as possible to facilitate the transition to the production house.

Benefits

The early use of perches leads to better skeletal development and muscle growth, higher flexibility, better accuracy in flights and jumps between levels, a reduction in aggression and feather pecking within the flock. Laying hens well trained to use perches during rearing have a lower prevalence of floor eggs.

Practical recommendations

Pullets and laying hens are highly motivated to perch. Pullets will learn to use easily accessible perches without assistance. Provide sufficient linear perch space for all birds to roost (at least 12 cm/pullet or 15 to 18 cm/hen), as this will promote an increased use of perches at night. Control the temperature of the perch area. Perches should be positioned to facilitate the movement of birds underneath, and there should be enough vertical space above the perch to allow the birds to stand in a normal posture. When possible, perches should not be placed above the litter area. Hens prefer higher perches within one tier and on upper aviary tiers to rest at night. The preferred perch shape is rectangular with rounded edges or mushroom-shaped, and this shape should be the same during the rearing and the laying periods. Round or oval-shaped perches are less favourable because they provide a poorer grip. Some perch designs, especially round metal perches, require skills that hens need to develop during the rearing phase. Consider perches made of durable material and without sharp edges that could injure hens or workers. Covering standard round metal perches with a soft polyurethane material can reduce keel bone fractures and deviations.

APPLICABILITY BOX

Theme

Animal husbandry, Perches.

Keywords

Perch utilization, perch preferences, perch design, perch balance, animal welfare laying hens and pullets, housing

Context

Transition to and operating cage-free housing systems for pullets and laying hens

Application time

Provide pullets with access to raised perches during the first 7 days at the latest

Period of impact

Throughout the rearing and productive life of the hens

Equipment

Design and number of adequate perches, in the rearing and laying facilities

Best in

All cage-free housing systems for pullets and hens: barn, free range, and organic production

Target audience

farmers, farm advisors



Figure 1: Example of an oval-shaped perch (left picture) and round perch in a multitier system (right picture) (Source: Vera Bavink, Fair Poultry).

On-farm application

System approach

- Perch access during the rearing period leads to animals with better physical condition and better ability to navigate in complex aviary systems provides an ideal place to roost at night and is a getaway option for individuals being harassed. Improved resting opportunities and behavioural options imply better welfare and health.

Evaluation

- Quantitative evaluation: assess the number of hens that use perches, average usage time/hen, and observe the reduction of welfare problems associated with the absence of perches.

Further information

Further reading

Scientific Opinion on welfare aspects of the use of perches for laying hens. EFSA (2015).

Weblinks

<https://www.efsa.europa.eu/en/efsajournal/pub/4131>

About this practice abstract and Best Practice Hens

Publishers:

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Best Practice Hens: To support egg production in non-cage systems and improve animal welfare, a consortium consisting of 7 partners will develop Best Practices for Non-cage Egg Production Systems as a European Commission, DG SANTE pilot project. These Best Practices will provide practical support to egg producers to encourage them to convert from cage to non-cage systems, including organic production.

Project website: www.bestpracticehens.eu/

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