

How to decide which protocol to use for assessing the welfare of laying hens in cage-free systems?

Problem

The current European hen welfare assessment protocols each have their own focus, duration, and application, making it hard to choose the protocol that best meets the expectations and limitations of the user.

Solution

A decision tree, based on a set of main practical considerations, helps the user choose the most appropriate method in line with particular goals, expectations and limitations.

Benefits

User satisfaction and quality of the outcomes depend to a large extent on applying the laying hen welfare assessment protocol which is most appropriate to the individual farm or organization unit.

Practical recommendations

The decision tree uses branches to select one (or more) welfare assessment protocols that best suit the user's needs (Figure 1):

1. **Has the user the intention to compare results with other farms?** Benchmarking is useful to obtain an insight in one's own farm status with other comparable (anonymous) farms. By choosing 'yes', only benchmarking protocols will be proposed.
2. **Is the user prepared to handle animals for physical inspection?** Most tools require animal handling and most options will be presented if this option is chosen.
3. **Include outdoor use indicators in the assessment?** Protocols with specific parameters will be proposed if the user is interested in using outdoor ranges (e.g. free-range, organic systems or wintergarden).

A simplified branching tree is represented in Figure 1. In the annex a more detailed figure can be found which provides additional information for each proposed protocol(s): protocol language, approximation of total assessment time, possibility to compare welfare status of the current flock with previous flocks and provision of generic or specific advice on the results after assessment.

APPLICABILITY BOX

Theme

Animal husbandry

Keywords

Welfare assessment, laying hens, pullets, protocols, decision tree

Context

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

Required time

Depending on protocol, number of flocks and outdoor option

Period of impact

After completion of the protocol

Equipment

Paper and pen or app compatible devices (if applicable)

Best in

Pullet rearing, laying phase; all cage-free housing systems: barn, free-range and organic production

Target audience

Farmers, farm advisors

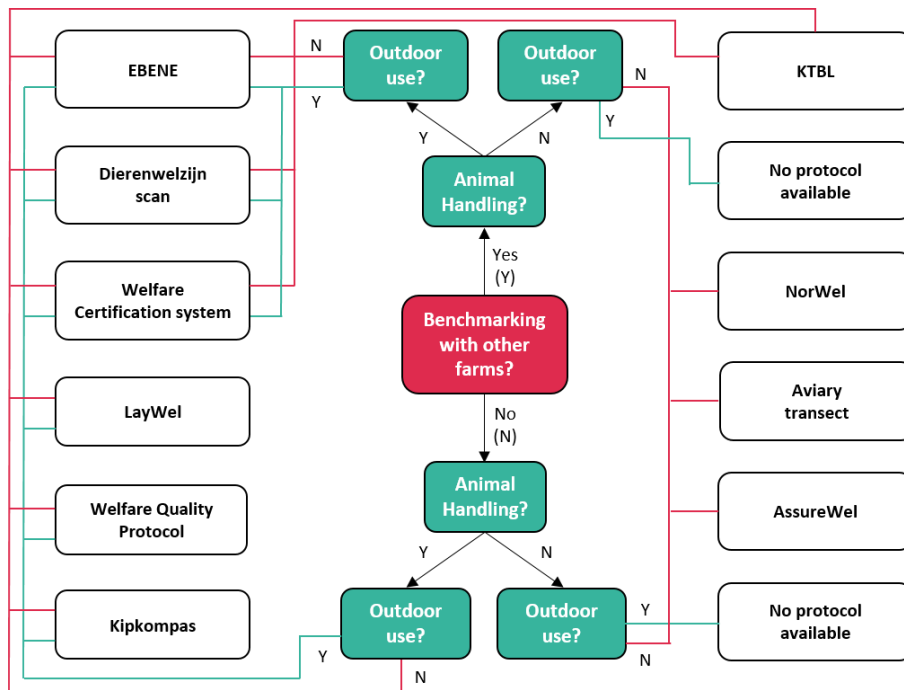
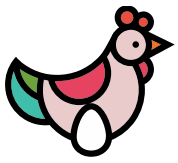


Figure 1: Decision tree laying hen welfare assessment protocols. The tree starts with 'Benchmarking' (central red square).

On-farm application

- The decision tree is available to any farmer or stakeholder involved with the welfare assessment of laying hens or pullets.

Further information

- Assurewel: <http://www.assurewel.org/>
- Aviary transect (coming soon)
- Dierenwelzijnscaan: <https://www.dierenwelzijnscaan.be/>
- EBENE: <https://organic-farmknowledge.org/tool/39330>
- Kipkompas: www.fairpoultry.com
- KTBL: <https://www.ktbl.de/themen/tierschutzindikatoren-junghennen>
- LayWel: <https://www.laywel.eu/>
- NorWel method (coming soon)
- Welfare Certification system: <http://www.animalwelfare.com/es/>
- Welfare Quality Protocol: <http://www.welfarequalitynetwork.net/en-us/reports/assessment-protocols>

About this practice abstract and Best Practice Hens

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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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