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Mr Jim Fitzpatrick MP
Minister for Farming and the Environment
Defra
Nobel House
17 Smith Square
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8 September 2009

Dear Minister,

BEAK TRIMMING OF LAYING HENS

1. In December 2007, Lord Rooker, the Minister then responsible for animal welfare, asked FAWC to reconsider its advice about beak trimming of laying hens, which is set to be banned in Great Britain after December 2010. This request followed publication of our Opinion on beak trimming in November 2007 (www.fawc.org.uk/pdf/beak-trimming.pdf). In reconsidering its previous advice, the Council was asked by the Minister to take account of recent research at the University of Glasgow on 'Chronic neurophysiological and anatomical changes associated with infra-red beak treatment', along with other new evidence.

2. In this letter, our advice and comments are specific to laying hens, and do not cover breeders, turkeys or other poultry.

3. We stated previously, "*FAWC has long considered that the mutilation of all livestock is undesirable and continues to regard beak trimming as a major insult to the hen's welfare*" (paragraph 39). The research at Glasgow found no evidence of chronic pain after infra-red beak treatment. However, we are still concerned about this method of beak trimming because of the "*trauma to the bird during the procedure; loss of a sensory tool; and loss of integrity of a living animal by the removal of part of its beak*" (paragraph 38). These outstanding welfare and ethical issues are common to any method of beak trimming.

4. **We therefore reiterate our advice that every effort should be made to end the routine beak trimming of laying hens in Great Britain as soon as possible.**

5. The British poultry industry was made aware of the 2010 ban on beak trimming about seven years ago. Since then, there has been limited progress in the control of injurious pecking of hens under commercial conditions in Great Britain. More effort should have been made by the industry to prepare for the ban by the development of new strains of hens or husbandry systems, for example. In the absence of alternative control measures, then the introduction of a ban on beak trimming will affect the welfare of hens considerably. Many

farms may simply fail to comply with the ban while those that do may experience major problems with feather pecking and cannibalism.

4. **We stand by our previous recommendation** that the ban on beak trimming should not be introduced with effect from December 2010, but should be deferred until it can be demonstrated reliably under commercial conditions that laying hens can be managed without beak trimming without a greater risk to their welfare than that caused by beak trimming itself.

5. In the interim, there will still be a need for beak trimming. The Glasgow results support our previous view that “*infra-red beak treatment appears to be the treatment of choice should beak trimming of laying hens be considered necessary*” (paragraph 42). **We recommend** that infra-red beak treatment should be the only method used routinely from a set date, such as January 2011. However, we recognise that there may be some concern about competition since at present only one company manufactures and leases the necessary equipment.

6. Infra-red beak treatment can only be applied to day-old chicks, so other methods will still have to be available in emergencies, for example if there is an outbreak of feather pecking in a flock of hens that have not been beak-trimmed. Our advice on infra-red beak treatment has been published (www.fawc.org.uk/letters/180105.htm). Guidelines for this treatment are also provided by the RSPCA as part of their Freedom Food programme, which covers most free-range egg production in the UK.

7. Useful information is available on the management of hens without beak trimming in the Defra 2005 report “A guide to the practical management of feather pecking and cannibalism in free range laying hens”. Some strains of hens are less prone to injurious pecking than others, and some breeders are incorporating information on pecking behaviour in their selection programmes. Furthermore, some countries such as Switzerland, Austria and Sweden are largely managing without beak trimming, although generally in small flocks with high labour inputs. It is reported that farmers in these countries experienced several years of pecking problems before successfully overcoming them, and with no clear, ‘fail-safe’ methods for that success.

8. Unfortunately, none of this evidence is sufficient to give assurance that farmers working under British conditions can avoid both beak trimming and severe pecking, so a concerted strategy is needed to manage hens without beak trimming. This should include:

- Learning from producers, including those in Switzerland, Austria and Scandinavia, who are successfully managing large flocks of laying hens without beak trimming
- Stronger emphasis on rearing methods of pullets, both in themselves and to ensure that they are appropriate to the laying systems
- Stronger emphasis on choice of strains and/or genetic selection of hens that are not prone to injurious pecking
- Use of smaller groups in husbandry systems (including enriched cages), both because they are advantageous in themselves and because they allow trials of alternatives to beak-trimming in part rather than all of a large flock
- Contingency plans for the control of injurious pecking in hens with intact beaks, including the financial implications

- Financial incentives for not beak trimming, for example from retailers or from Common Agricultural Policy funding (Pillar 2 modulated funds).

9. **We recommend** that the Defra Beak Trimming Action Group should be reconvened with a mandate to develop and implement a strategy as outlined above, supported where necessary by public funds.

10. The ban should not be deferred indefinitely and there should be a proper plan to phase out beak trimming of laying hens. **We recommend** that deferment of the ban on beak trimming should be reviewed in 2015, to decide when such a ban will be introduced. By then the change in husbandry methods following the phase-out of conventional cages will be well established. **We emphasise that the firm intention should be to fix a date for the ban at that time, rather than to defer it further, and that considerable effort will be needed between now and then to prepare for that decision.**

Yours sincerely,



Professor Christopher Wathes

cc Ministers in Wales and Scotland; CVOs