

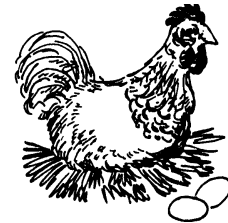


The University of Georgia

Cooperative Extension Service

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COMMERCIAL EGG TIP . . .

AN INCREASED ANIMAL WELFARE COMMITMENT REQUIRES A RAISED CONSCIENCE

The United Egg Producers (UEP) has recently instituted a voluntary animal welfare (AW) certification program based on its Animal Husbandry Guidelines. These guidelines, which were developed with input from a scientific advisory committee, give specifications and recommendations for housing and space allowance, beak trimming, molting, and handling and transportation. Compliance with the certification program will be verified by an audit program. Egg companies achieving animal welfare certification will have the opportunity to display a welfare seal on their products. To date, about 190 egg companies representing over 80% of the egg production in the United States have joined the UEP AW certification program. It is commendable that the egg industry is seeking to keep pace with the development of values in U.S. society regarding the treatment of domestic animals.

It would be a mistake, however, for company owners and live production managers to think that all that is necessary to upgrade to a higher animal welfare standard is to comply with a few stipulations. A welfare seal on product packaging is a claim that a company wants to protect the welfare of its birds because they are sentient creatures, and not merely because some minimum level of welfare is necessary for optimum production performance, or because participation in an AW certification program is good for business. The consumer will expect that such a company has sought to ensure that its flocks have a good quality of life and are free from unreasonable suffering at all times. This includes aspects of poultry husbandry that do not lend themselves to audit inspection.

The commitment to poultry welfare that comes with the UEP AW certification program

PUTTING KNOWLEDGE TO WORK


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requires that awareness of the moral value of the living bird be raised company-wide. This will be a growing experience for many of the people who are responsible for the daily management and handling of hens and pullets. Their background has not prepared them to think of chickens from a moral perspective. Their growth in understanding cannot be left to chance, otherwise the company's commitment to poultry welfare that exists on paper may not be fully reflected in the field. Any company that has joined the UEP AW certification program should appoint a team to develop an internal animal welfare program. Poultry welfare training sessions should be arranged for all employees who manage or handle live birds and for people who contract services to the company, such as catching and transportation. Every aspect of company operations, e.g., pullet growing, egg production, hatchery management (if applicable), catching and transportation, feed manufacture, and even manure management, should be reviewed for potential impact on bird welfare. Hazards to bird welfare should be identified and records should be kept of any welfare-related problems that do occur. The program should be reviewed annually and modified as needed.

Many of the organizations that advocate animal welfare-related changes in poultry husbandry are not friends of the industry. Some would like nothing more than to find animal welfare failures in egg companies that have joined the UEP AW certification program. They could use such failures to argue that a voluntary, industry-maintained program does not work. An animal welfare audit program can only take a "snap shot" assessment of an egg production operation. Things can happen that would seldom be picked up in an audit. It is important that egg companies be sincere in their commitment to animal welfare.

What kind of animal welfare failures can occur? The following examples are not intended to be exhaustive. For instance, even though ammonia might be kept within a 50 ppm 24-hour time-weighted average, it may be possible in some housing types for ammonia concentration to rise during times of low ventilation to levels that would be injurious or distressing to birds. Although end-of-cycle fasting is discouraged in the UEP AW certification program, an egg producer might to save some money by withdrawing feed from flocks a few days before removal. Increased bone fragility of the spent hens would result, with a higher occurrence of bone fracture during catch. Disease outbreaks not only cost money, but also can cause terrible suffering of birds. A slack biosecurity program or poorly applied vaccination program is a welfare issue, not just an economic issue. Poor inspection of birds by ignorant or uncaring house walkers can cause welfare problems due to unrepaired drinkers or untimely removal of mortality. Services contracted out to outside crews may be especially prone to welfare violations because egg company personnel may be lulled into the thought that the actions of a contract crew are not their responsibility. Nothing could be farther from the truth. The quality of procedures such as beak trimming, catching, on-farm spent hen killing, and bird protection from suffering during transportation will reflect back on the egg company. Egg companies that participate in the UEP AW certification program should ensure that contract crews also comply with the letter and spirit of this program.

Protection of bird welfare in an egg company will not happen automatically. Responsible, trained personnel must be available throughout the company who will make the right decisions in all aspects of the management and handling of flocks. Any company that wishes to develop a quality animal welfare program is encouraged to contact their state cooperative extension service for assistance.



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