
Editorial

Discussions in Europe about the welfare of laying hens have intensified in anticipation of the review of the EU Council Directive 99/74/EC. More commonly known as 'The Laying Hen Directive'; this will have a major influence on egg production throughout Europe.

In July, the President of WPSA, Dr Peter Hunton, attended the UK Symposium on 'Welfare of the Laying Hen' held in Bristol, England. This was the 27th in a series of fine poultry science Symposia going back many years. Reporting on the proceedings, Dr Hunton said that while mainly devoted to European affairs and an excellent follow-up to the 2001 Poultry Welfare Symposium held in Zollikofen, Switzerland, the subject of welfare is of world-wide interest. About 120 people registered, heard 35 well-prepared papers and looked at 20 posters. A full report of the Symposium by UK Branch WPSA Secretary, John Parsons, was published in the September 2003 issue of this Journal.

Commenting further, on the Bristol proceedings, Dr Hunton observed with considerable regret that the representatives from government and the animal welfare lobby seemed to have closed their minds to the latest facts about welfare, presented during these important discussions by the leading scientific authorities, scientists are being ignored.

Laying hen welfare also featured prominently on the programme for the opening day of the combined XVth European Symposium on the Quality of Poultry Meat and the Xth Symposium on the Quality of Eggs and Egg Products, (WPSA Working Groups 4&5) held during September at St Briec in Brittany, France. During the first plenary session, devoted to 'New European regulations and their impact', Stefania Marrone from the European Commission in Brussels, outlined the terms of Directive 1999/74/EC. This lays down minimum standards for the protection of laying hens leading to the eventual banning of conventional (unenriched) laying cages, by 1st January 2012. Although the provisions of this Directive are supposed to have been progressively implemented since the beginning of 2002, Dr Marrone admitted that transition to the use of 'enriched' cages and other approved alternatives such as free range or barn housing systems, was so far only evident, to any significant extent, in a few EU member countries. Some major egg production countries in Europe were still exclusively using laying cages. Nor did she offer any explanation as to what would happen in the 10 or more countries currently using conventional laying cage egg production systems, expected to become new members of the EU in the near future.

It was encouraging to hear that the EU Commission regards it as a priority to study further the balance between welfare, hygiene, economics and environmental implications and their impact on the cost of production and on the competitiveness of EU production with third countries. But it was at the same time disappointing to come away with the impression that the growing volume of scientific evidence that so-called improved or alternative laying systems offer little or nothing in terms of improved bird welfare and health; lower egg quality and considerably higher end-product costs, was being ignored. Views of politicians, animal welfare activists and consumers are based more on perception than reality. As the eminent poultry scientist from Germany, Professor Dietmar Flock has said, the prevalent attitude seems to be "my mind is made up, please don't confuse me with the facts".

But there clearly are some people taking note of what scientists say. Last year, according to the Institute of Scientific Information (ISI) Journal Citation reports for 2001, the Impact Factor for the World's Poultry Science Journal was 0.689, ranking it 17/44 in the group of Animal Science journals. But in this year's recently published report, our Impact Factor has risen to 1.128 and our ranking gone up to 10/42. This compares this Journal favourably with other publications in our specialist field: Poultry Science 1.224 (8/42) and British Poultry Science 0.086 (14/42). Most welcome news on which to round off this year.

David Martin

Editor