

**Welfare Assessment of Birds in Houses Three and Four at Old Hill
Farm, Ross on Wye, HR9 7TF. 29 April 2008**

Dr Sue M Haslam BVSc PhD DWEL MRCVS

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Dated: 10 June 2008

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Executive Summary

A visit was made to Old Hill Farm, Ross on Wye on 29th April 2008. A welfare assessment of birds in houses 3 and 4 was made by Dr S M Haslam BVSc PhD DWEL MRCVS, using the current draft of the EU Welfare Quality® broiler chicken welfare assessment protocol: this protocol is under development. The welfare of each flock was also assessed by calculating the Unitary Welfare Index score, a published, weighted, integrated score. The birds were 39 days on the day of the visit. House 4 was fitted with a **Mini-FLOCKMAN** device, which alters lighting patterns and controls feed by meal feeding. House 3 had a standard four hour dark period with no dawn-dusk dimming and was fed *ad libitum*.

The number of flocks assessed for this exercise was too small to demonstrate any statistically significant differences between birds in the experimental and control houses. The differences seen could have been due to parent age, chick quality or the experimental intervention.

The experimental house had considerably lower mortality, either including or excluding culled birds, than the control house. Mortality including culls was over 26% lower in the experimental than in the control house and mortality, excluding culls, was over 39% lower. The walking ability of birds in the experimental house was markedly better than that of birds in the control house, with average bird gait score 0.19 lower in the experimental house. There were over 4 times (4.25) the percentage of birds sampled with a gait score of over 2 in the control than in the experimental house. Poor walking ability severely reduces the welfare state of birds, as it affects bird welfare in terms of most of the Five Freedoms, developed by the UK Farm Animal Welfare Council, which are widely used in welfare assessment.

The birds in the experimental house were cleaner and had a lower prevalence of Hock Bum than those in the control house. The higher prevalence of Foot Pad Dermatitis found in the experimental house is likely to have reflected the better leg health of birds in the experimental house. During the visit one hundred birds were examined for clinical pathology: 7% of the birds examined in the control house had ascites while no birds were found with this condition in the experimental house.

Fearfulness in broilers is difficult to assess, as results of reliable and valid tests developed to assess fear in hens are confounded by leg health and stocking density in broiler chickens. Birds in the control house showed episodes of 'alarm' behaviour, consisting of considerable flapping and vigorous escape attempts, as the house was walked, in contrast to the birds in the experimental house in which no alarm responses were seen.

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