



## Q&A with Dr. Eric Gingerich on Pecking Challenges Facing the Cage Free Industry

**I would like to express my appreciation for Dr. Eric Gingerich taking the time to give his input for us regarding the pecking challenges that are facing the cage free layer industry.**

**KS:** Please describe the causes of pecking and other cannibalistic behaviors in cage free layers and how these bad habits develop?

**EG:** Pecking and cannibalism usually have multiple factors involved in the onset of the problem. The list of factors that lead to or increase the severity of pecking and cannibalism are as follows: Nutritional deficiencies – sodium, amino acids, calcium

- These deficiencies cause birds to be nervous and looking for other sources for these nutrients, so they peck their penmates.
- Low amino acid intakes also lead to poor feathering.
- Excessive light intensity, especially in the nesting area
- Insufficient space – feed, floor, nest, or water
  - Increased competition for these requirements leads to more interaction amongst penmates and pecking activity.
  - Low feed and water intake can lead to low nutrient intakes and more nervousness.
- Genetic predisposition
  - There is a definite difference in strains of layers in regard to their tendency to peck.
- Feeding pelleted feed
  - Apparently, eating mash, that has different particle sizes, is part of the bird's foraging behaviour that is satisfying to the bird.
- Lack of environmental enrichments (boredom)
  - Enrichments, especially ones that allow the bird to consume or dismantle an object, diverts the bird's attention from pecking at their penmates
- Excess egg size
  - Egg weights above the desired level puts more stress on the reproductive tract and leading to a prolonged time of oviduct eversion during egg laying. This allows more opportunity for other hens to peck at this shiny object.
- Low litter levels
  - Foraging in sufficient litter is a big part of diversion of birds from pecking.
  - Long, sharp beaks allow the birds to create more damage to their victims.
- Poor feathering especially around the vent area
  - During egg laying, when the oviduct is everted, is an opportune time for pecking to occur. A low feather cover around the vent allows greater visualization of this area.
- Lack of large particle calcium, grit, or fiber
  - Apparently, the filling of the gizzard with an insoluble or semi-insoluble rock gives the birds a satisfied feeling.
  - The same satiation feeling occurs with fibrous feed ingredients like oats.

**KS:** When these bad habits develop, what are the injuries and other negative impacts this activity causes and or contributes to?

**EG:** Flightiness, decreased feather cover, and excess mortality are the effects.

**KS:** How does this activity affect production and impact the bottom line?

**EG:** The excess flightiness results in poorer feed conversion from the extra amount of activity. Decreased feather cover will also result in a higher feed conversion from energy loss from exposed skin. Excess mortality will affect the number of hen-housed eggs especially if the problem starts early in lay.

**KS:** How can our PeckAway enrichment stone help reduce these cannibalistic behaviors?

**EG:** An enrichment like PeckAway helps divert the birds pecking behaviour away from the birds penmates, occupies their time, and satisfies their desire to peck.

**KS:** In your experience, what is the expected ROI where a customer could have benefited from using PeckAway had it been implemented?

**EG:** I think this kind of enrichment would give at least a 2:1 ROI from improved feed conversion and lower mortality savings.

**KS:** Is there a specific age where PeckAway should be introduced to help prevent or reduce the development of these destructive behaviors?

**EG:** I think the earlier the better. I know some producers that introduce these type enrichments in the grow house and transfer them to the lay house.

**KS:** Please add any further details and or recommendations that our readers may want to consider in promoting a more friendly environment for their birds?

**EG:** Reducing problems with feather pecking and cannibalism requires multiple practices including appropriate beak trimming, light intensity control, egg size control, adequate nutrient intake, proper space allotments, use of environmental enrichments, using good quality litter and adequate amounts of litter, feeding adequate fiber, feeding grit and large particle calcium, and select strains of layers that do not peck.

**KS:** Raising cage free birds is certainly a challenge that proves management is the key to success! I believe the information you have provided here will be a great benefit and help our customers and readers gain the edge needed to perform! Thank you once again Dr. Gingerich!

**We appreciate your business and look forward to hearing from you soon!**