Eggs around the world – an industry update

Every once in a while we think it's useful, and interesting, to have a look around the globe to see what's happening in the egg world, what innovations are on the horizon, what welfare improvements are afoot and what might be of interest to those of us who keep hens on a smaller scale than our commercial equivalents.

Male chick culling may become a thing of the past thanks to in-ovo sexing.

AVIAN INFLUENZA – A CHINA / UK COLLABORATION

It is always of great value to us as pet hen keepers to know the latest on the AI situation and at the end of 2024 a five-year research project was agreed between The Pirbright Institute in the UK (a world-leading centre of excellence in the research of viral diseases in livestock) and several Chinese academic institutions. The purpose of the programme is to provide the opportunity for extensive research into different aspects of avian diseases which it is hoped will result in better diagnostics tests and vaccine development, as well as improved training for scientists at both student and post-doctoral level.

Let's hope this powerful collaboration brings about improvements in commercial poultry welfare and wellbeing too.

FRESH BEDDING

Poulterra, a US-based company, has come up with a rather attractive idea to provide crop-based bedding to poultry farms and whilst that may not sound very exciting, the most astounding aspect of this new innovation is that the product, known 'Manure-as-a-Service', is absolutely free of charge.

The product used is the highly efficient and carbon-negative grass, miscanthus, which is planted close to poultry farms and then used as bedding by poultry farmers. The only 'payback' is that Poulterra takes the previous year's litter which it then uses to produce renewable natural gas and high-quality, low-carbon fertilisers.

The good news doesn't stop there as the bedding has a super absorbency so reduces moisture levels in poultry units which in turn results in better maintenance of a balanced environment, reducing the need for fans and heat input, saving more costs. In fact the whole process achieves a circular economy model on an unparalleled scale. And most importantly, the birds will be all the happier for it.

FEEDING HOUSEHOLD SCRAPS

In the UK it is illegal to feed kitchen scraps of any kind to poultry whether they are kept commercially or as pets, whether kept for eggs or for meat. This is because of the risk of disease in feeding waste that may have cross contamination with other species. However, a study led by the University of California has now looked at the potential of using 'treated' consumer food scraps in poultry feed. The review has considered the nutritional value as well as disease concerns surrounding the use of consumer scraps and it appears that the heat treatment used, in what is effectively a sterilisation process, is enough to control contaminants in the finished dry poultry feed additive.

The study results have been timed to emerge just as commercial use has been approved in the US with the company dehydrating food scraps and turning vegetables and fruit leftovers into sterilised, dry product that can be added to poultry feed.

AI – FOR BETTER OR WORSE?

There aren't many areas of life that Artificial Intelligence is not marching into at a fast pace at the moment and the poultry sector is no exception. In short AI is being used already in how eggs are graded by size and packed by huge automated machines, but there is much more to come with AI potentially

Treated food scraps could be used in poultry feed.

White eggs are on the rise.

giving farmers far more accurate feedback on aspects such as feed and water consumption, early disease detection and other welfare factors.

In answer to the industry's fears of impending job losses, the AI proactivists reassure that having AI support with accurate and more comprehensive data, will leave workers on the ground more time to deal with the aspects of care that only human interaction can undertake. We hope that is indeed the case.

IN-OVO SEXING GROWING NICELY

In-ovo sexing has been around for a number of years, but it's only recently that it's becoming more mainstream, largely due to societal pressure to improve welfare for male chicks. Now it's gaining traction and there are several companies using slightly different technologies all with the same outcome.

Cheggy is the name of the in-ovo sexing machine that can sex 20,000 eggs per hour, developed in Germany and now being used across France, Germany, Belgium and Spain to name a few. Fully automated and highly accurate Cheggy is saving millions of male chicks from being slaughtered on hatching.

Snow eggs

Other technologies with the same end result include Orbem, which will be used by the two main hatcheries in Switzerland in 2025 and EggXYT who are collaborating with investment from an egg company in Japan. The partnership will see EggXYT's genetic editing system being used, attaching a fluorescent marker to male eggs. Clever stuff, and so much better than the fate meted out to billions of male chicks.

BACK HOME TO WHITE EGGS

White egg production is on the rise and this time not necessarily because Delia Smith put them on the front of her cook book (that was 25 years ago by the way) or they are being marketed as festive 'snow eggs'. This time it is because the welfare credentials appear to stack in favour of the white bird.

White birds are, it appears, more docile than their brown counterparts with virtually no pecking issues, no smothering concerns and fewer eggs being laid on the hen house floor rather than in nest boxes.

National retailer the Co-op plans to roll out white eggs across its 2,400 stores starting with a target of 10% rising to 30% of its supply in year three. So, watch out for more white eggs and the marketing campaign that will help to sell them to what until now has been a reluctant market, with Brits seeing brown eggs as a healthier option (even though eggs are not bread!).

All the above impact laying hens in one form or another and the charity hopes that whilst all this innovation is being researched and carried out, that the sentience of our lovely feathered friends is remembered at all times.

BHWT

The British Hen Welfare Trust (BHWT) was established in 2005 by Jane Howorth MBE. We are Britain's first registered charity concerned with rehoming laying hens while improving hen welfare across commercial and domestic sectors. We believe that pet hens matter; everything we do is to improve the welfare of our feathered friends and introduce more people to the joys of hen-keeping.

- Every year, with support from over 1,400 volunteers at 48 pop-up sites, we rehome over 50,000 hens saved from slaughter. To date we've rehomed over one million hens.
- We educate consumers to help them make informed choices when shopping. For example, about caged eggs hidden in processed foods and the problem of using large eggs, rather than small or mixed weight.
- We work closely with government agencies and veterinary institutions to develop programmes and practices to improve hen welfare in both the commercial and domestic sectors.
- We offer a wealth of information and guidance online and offer a free 'Hen Helpline' service to all hen keepers needing advice on caring for sick chickens.
- We have also developed an educational programme providing resources to schools to help pupils explore the connections between food, farming, and animal welfare.
- We work with academic researchers to facilitate ground-breaking studies into pet hens and provide grants to vets and veterinary students to conduct research into chickens to build evidence-based data about how best to care for pet hens.
- There are many ways to get involved with the British Hen Welfare Trust's work. From rehoming to fundraising, volunteering and donating, every single gesture helps – the smallest of things can have a huge impact. As we inch ever closer to rehoming our one millionth hen, we are urging everyone to get involved and help us to help as many hens as possible.