

**Extract from a paper by Dr Knut Niebuhr
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The development of beak trimming in Austria

Beak trimming has never been commonly practised in Austrian cage systems, nor in early alternative production.

As alternative production increased, feather pecking and cannibalism became more of a problem, or were perceived to be more of a problem, in the early '90s. There is a belief in the industry that an increase in injurious pecking followed the ban on the use of animal products such as meat meal in poultry feeds following the BSE crisis. The rearing companies recommended the use of beak trimming to ameliorate the problem and levels of beak trimming in alternative production rose to around 45% by the end of the millennium.

How beak trimming was (largely) phased out

Beak trimming was banned by the certification bodies but the ban was not executed. The rapid rise of beak trimming caused great concern to the animal welfare groups who owned the certification body KAN and wanted the ban enforced. At the same time, the producers were deeply concerned to prevent cannibalism which was not only a cause of economic loss but was traumatic for both hens and stock people. A mediation process was established to resolve the impasse.

The mediation process came up with an agreement to phase out beak trimming, with an agreed timetable of reduction. Steps were put in place to deal with the problem of feather pecking and cannibalism and to give farmers and rearers the confidence to manage hens without beak trimming.

The farmers agreed that:

- Those who continued to beak trim in the first years after the agreement was signed would pay an additional certification fee which increased annually

- This created a fund which provided an insurance scheme which compensated any farmer who lost birds to cannibalism as a result of keeping birds with intact beaks.

A project was set up and funded by the Austrian Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry, Environment and Water Management which established guidelines for farmers and conducted a literature search to collect all information available concerning feather pecking and its causes the agreement phasing beak-trimming out was signed in June 2000. Since 2005, there has been very little beak trimming in alternative husbandry in Austria. It dropped from a peak of just over 45% in 2001 to under 5% by 2005. It is currently just over 1%. The process of phasing out beak trimming took four and a half years from the signing of the agreement.

Levels of beak trimming started to drop after 2001 as the agreement took effect. This was followed by a small increase in both feather pecking and the more serious injurious pecking.

However, as the project to address these problems advanced, levels of both dropped at the same time as beak trimming continued to be phased out.

Injurious pecking and feather pecking are multi-factorial in their origin.

An integrated approach is required including:

- Suitable breeds
- Appropriate stocking densities in both rearing and laying houses
- Provision of raised perches

- Rearing systems with a similar layout to laying houses
- High protein diets, especially in the early stages of lay
- Control of weight gain, especially in rear
- A proper health plan including vaccination
- Good climate management, especially levels of pollutants such as ammonia
- Development of good human-animal relationships
- High levels of stockmanship and management including record keeping.

It is important that hens are bred for docility and against the tendencies towards feather pecking and cannibalism. In Austria, the breed Lohmann's Brown dominates the market, both in intensive and in alternative systems. A minority of alternative systems use the Lohmann's Tradition breed. Other breeds are rarely used in Austria, despite the attempts of their salesmen.

Although there is no data on this, anecdotally, farmers who had tried other breeds experienced greater levels of problem with injurious pecking.

High protein diets and phased feeding are key to the success of the Austrian system.

These contain up to 19% protein for the first most productive stage of lay (the protein will come from vegetable sources such as soya, supplemented by synthetic amino-acids such as lysine and methionine as necessary), dropping to 18.5% till week 50 and perhaps later to 18% or 17.5% to avoid excessive egg size. These percentages are higher than nutritionists would advise, but when they have tried lower levels they have had problems with injurious pecking. Weight gain in rearing flocks is also crucial – rearing flocks with lower body weight or large spread will always be problematic.

Nobody is suggesting that Austrian systems are free of feather pecking, but that levels of the more serious injurious pecking including cannibalism have been reduced at the same time as levels of beak trimming. In Austria, it is seldom for flocks to have levels of injurious pecking that increase mortality. Most importantly, the steps required to manage flocks without beak-trimming actually managed to reduce feather pecking and cannibalism at the same time, creating a win-win situation which was also good for production.

The avoidance of feather pecking and injurious pecking in birds with intact beaks is a key measure of good welfare in laying hens. Provided that injurious pecking can be controlled, the phasing out of beak-trimming is good for both production and welfare.

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