

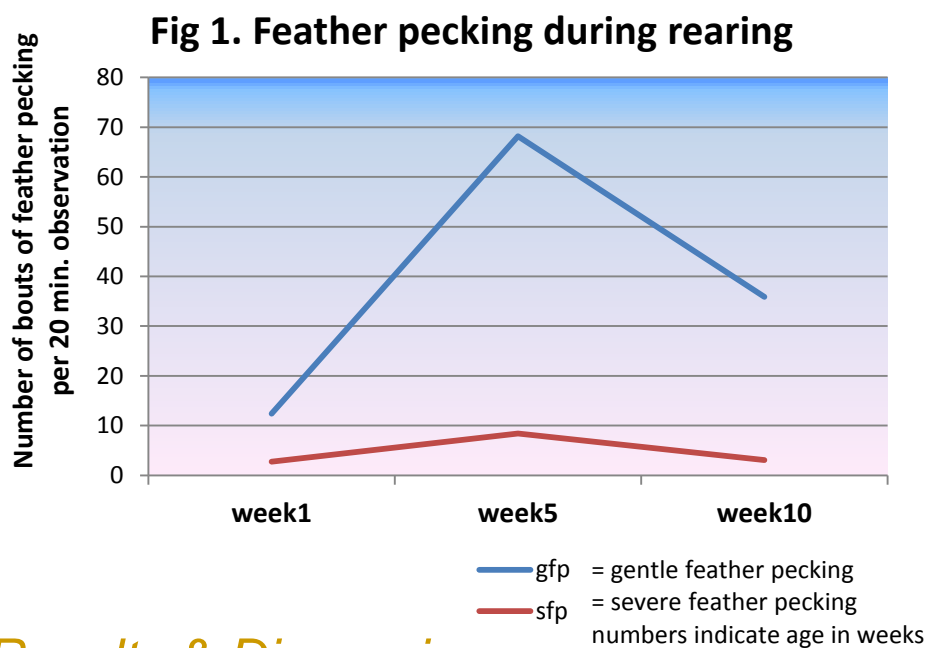
Integrating science and practice

in order to reduce **feather pecking** in commercial laying hens

Introduction

Occurrences of feather pecking (FP: see picture) are highest during laying (± 35 weeks of age). Scientists argue that FP already occurs during rearing (<17 weeks of age). This has, however, never been studied on conventional rearing farms, with inclusion of farmer's opinion on critical periods and with information on possible risk factors.

We, therefore \longrightarrow



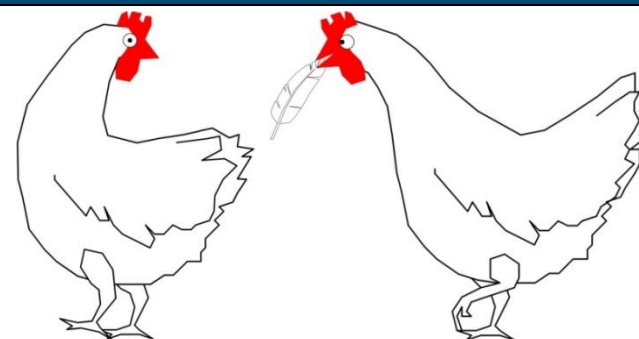
Results & Discussion

- Feather pecking was highest at five weeks of age (Fig 1).
- Feather damage was low throughout rearing (Fig 2).
- Occurrences of severe damage (see picture in Fig 2) were only recorded at five weeks of age in 6 out of 42 flocks.
- The majority of farmers (14/25) named that 4/5 weeks was a critical period in the development of FP.

Critical period & risk factors

Most feather pecking occurred at **five weeks of age** and was named as critical period by most of the rearing farmers.

Around 4/5 weeks of age, rearing hens go through **external changes** (mixing with other birds, change in housing and change in substrate provision) and **internal changes** (first moulting period) which can cause a risk in the development of FP.



...studied the development of FP in commercially kept rearing hens, and added farmer's opinion on FP during rearing.

Material and methods

We studied:

- 42 commercial rearing flocks of Ter Heerdt BV
- Gentle and severe feather pecking (2*20 min observation) at week 1, 5 and 10 of age
- Feather damage score at week 5 (n=15), 10 (n=15) and 15 (n=20) of age (based on Welfare Quality, 2009)

We interviewed:

- 25 rearing farmers about the critical periods in the development of FP during rearing
- And assessed possible risk factors related to management during rearing

Recommendation

Continuation of substrate provision and slowly introducing new birds may reduce FP around 5 weeks of age, and throughout rearing.

Fig 2. Feather damage during rearing

