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The Rt Hon Tessa Jowell MP
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Our ref: MC 190416/GH

26 July 2010

From the Secretary of State
The Rt Hon Caroline Spelman MP

Tessa

Thank you for your letter of 1 July on behalf of a number of your constituents about EDM 260 on beak trimming of laying hens.

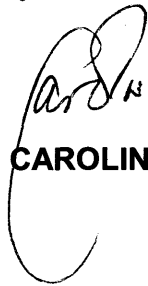
The vast majority of chicks intended to become laying hens are routinely beak trimmed irrespective of the housing system used. The reason for beak trimming is to reduce the risk of injurious pecking that can, if unchecked, lead to significant feather and skin damage, cannibalism, pain, suffering and death to a substantial proportion of birds kept in flocks in all systems of husbandry, including hens kept on free range units. Injurious pecking is unpredictable and sudden and once started, problems are difficult to resolve.

Whilst the Government's long term goal is to ban routine beak trimming, it considers the further advice of the Farm Animal Welfare Council (FAWC), the independent committee that advises Ministers on farm animal welfare, represents a sensible, pragmatic approach. FAWC recommended a postponement to the total ban on routine beak trimming, until it can be demonstrated reliably under commercial conditions that laying hens can be managed without beak trimming, without a greater risk to their welfare than that caused by beak trimming itself.

Defra has reviewed the scientific evidence currently available and concluded that the evidence indicates that infra-red beak trimming has welfare benefits over alternative methods of beak trimming, such as the use of a hot blade.

Defra issued a full 12 week consultation in January this year on an amendment to the Mutilations (Permitted Procedures) (England) Regulations 2007 to remove the ban on routine beak trimming of laying hens which comes into force on 1 January 2011. The amendment allows for routine beak trimming of day old chicks to be done using the infra-red technique only, with other methods (for example the use of a hot blade) restricted to emergency use only. The comments from the consultation are currently being considered.

Yours ever,



CAROLINE SPELMAN MP