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The Rt Hon Tessa Jowell MP  
House of Commons  
London  
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Your ref: 01100423  
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23 February 2010

From the Secretary of State  
The Rt Hon Hilary Benn MP

Thank you for your letter of 8 February on behalf of a number of your constituents about beak trimming.

Beak trimming of laying hens is currently carried out to prevent severe welfare problems in laying hen flocks. The EU Directive on the welfare of laying hens (1999/74/EC) prohibits all mutilation, but permits Member States to authorise beak trimming in order to prevent feather pecking and cannibalism, provided it is carried out by qualified staff on birds that are less than 10 days old and intended for laying. The UK is currently using this derogation, but from 1 January 2011 beak trimming will be banned under the Mutilations (Permitted Procedures) (England) Regulations 2007 (as amended). Similar but separate legislation has been implemented by the Devolved Administrations for Scotland, Northern Ireland and Wales.

The independent Farm Animal Welfare Council (FAWC), which advises Ministers, published its interim opinion on the beak trimming of laying hens in November 2007. It recommended that until alternative measures for controlling injurious feather pecking in laying hens were developed, the complete ban should not be introduced from 1 January 2011. FAWC also recommended that further research should be undertaken on the use of the infra-red technique and its long term effects. This research by Glasgow University and joint funded by Defra and the British Egg Industry Council, was completed in May 2009.

FAWC recently reviewed the findings of this research and other evidence and has reiterated its previous advice to Ministers in 2007, that a complete ban on routine beak trimming should not be introduced from 1 January 2011, as is currently in legislation, but should be deferred 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. FAWC recommended that infra-red beak treatment should be the only method used routinely.

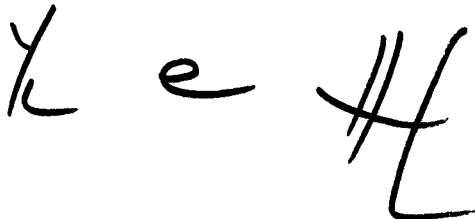
Whilst the Government's long term goal is to ban routine beak trimming, it considers the further advice of FAWC to postpone the total ban on the routine beak trimming represents a sensible, pragmatic approach and is in the interests of laying hen welfare. It is clear that birds would suffer worse insults through feather pecking and cannibalism.

Defra issued a consultation on 20 January on an amendment to the Mutilations (Permitted Procedures) (England) Regulations 2007 (S.I. 2007/1100) to remove the ban on routine beak trimming of laying hens that comes into force on 1 January 2011. The amendment allows for routine beak trimming of day old chicks intended for laying to be done using the infra-red technique only, with other methods (for example, the use of a hot blade) restricted to emergency use. The consultation package can be found on the Defra website and at the following link:

<http://www.defra.gov.uk/corporate/consult/mutilations-regs/>

The deadline for responses is 14 April and comments on these proposals are welcome.

I hope this helps.

A handwritten signature in black ink, consisting of a stylized 'H', a lowercase 'e', and another stylized 'H'.

**HILARY BENN**