

THE BENEFITS OF REARING PULLETS IN A MULTI-TIER SYSTEM

The advantages of multi-tier houses for birds in lay are becoming increasingly evident.

But unless pullets understand how to use these systems on transfer to the laying farm they may become stressed, and may need a helping hand to get up to roost. Training pullets in rear can overcome this problem and deliver early benefits to producers.

Multi-tier poultry systems for laying flocks

Multi-tier housing systems promote flock welfare by allowing birds to express their natural behaviours, and encourage healthy development. A series of platforms and ramps with feed and water freely available give birds the opportunity to move around and explore their environment, and to scratch, nest and perch at different levels.

However, to take advantage of a multi-tier system, birds arriving at the laying farm must understand how to move around the tiers to find what they need, and in particular where to roost. If this training can take place in rear, the flock will be quick to recognise three-dimensional facilities on transfer to the laying farm, and adapt more readily to the system.

Rearing pullets in 'like for like' systems

It is widely accepted that rearing pullets in a system with challenges similar to those of the laying house can help birds adjust more quickly to the laying environment, and minimise stress. RSPCA welfare standards require that if pullets are destined for a multi-

tier laying unit, tiers must be provided at different heights in rear to enable birds to become accustomed to moving around the system, and to enable roosting on raised tiers.

“Training pullets to use a multi-tiered system is an extension of our focus on rearing pullets in ‘like for like’ conditions, so that they adapt quickly to the laying farm,” explains Rearing Director Charles Macleod from Humphrey Feeds & Pullets. “We train our pullets to jump up using tiered rearing systems, and customers report that our birds are robust and adapt readily to their new environment.”

Flat deck rearing systems

Pullets traditionally raised on the ground are likely to find the transition to multi-tier housing physically and mentally challenging. They have little incentive to take load-bearing exercise to develop strong bones, and the absence of mental stimulation leads them to suffer greater stress when faced with any change to their environment.

Tiered rearing systems

By contrast, a multi-level system that offers growing pullets the opportunity to move up and down in three dimensions and explore their environment will assist their development and provide valuable training in how to move around a tiered laying house.

Tiered rearing systems, including multi-tier and aviary rearing systems, are more labour-intensive for the rearing team, as chicks must be encouraged to explore their environment and trained to use it properly. But this early investment of time reaps rewards on arrival at the laying farm, where trained flocks are less likely to require weeks of help from producers to become familiar with the system.

Pullets free to forage

Whilst some systems use partitions to contain chicks for the initial few days, Humphrey

Feeds & Pullets prefers a completely unrestricted environment. As Charles explains: “Our pullets are reared in open systems with no partitions, including full access to litter from placement. This provides conditions ideal for the cycling of coccidial vaccine to give robust immunity.”

Foraging in the developing litter and accessing available enrichments also promotes healthy social behaviour and encourages movement, developing the pullet’s frame and musculature from the start, says Charles. “The chicks quickly learn from environmental conditions such as heat and light how to move around a tiered system. We are proud to supply robust pullets that provide a good return on investment.”

Transition to the laying farm

Premium poultry breeders do their best to prepare flocks for the move to the laying farm, including matching their feed and the challenges of the environment, and making the transition itself as stress-free as possible.

Poultry Specialist James Wilson from Humphrey Feeds & Pullets accepts that the process of transfer itself can be demanding, which makes it all the more important that the birds enjoy familiar surroundings and feed on arrival. “We help to settle flocks at the laying farm, and provide support as the birds come into lay. The pullets reared in our tiered system adapt very well to multi-tier laying houses - they are quick to ‘jump up’ to access feed and water so develop quickly, and floor eggs are low.”

The practical benefits of trained pullets

Poultry farmers Gwen and Bleddyn Lewis from South Wales are delighted with their latest flock, reared at Humphrey Feed & Pullets for their multi-tier laying house. “We barely had to train them at all when they arrived,” says Gwen. “Most jumped up right

away, and the rest were quick to follow. It saved us a lot of time and effort.”

James Wilson is Gwen’s Poultry Specialist and was on hand to ease the flock’s transition to her farm.

“Visiting 5-6 farms a week means we really get to see how pullets from a variety of suppliers perform,” he says, “and it’s clear that Gwen’s experience is typical. Pullets taught how to behave from an early age are calmer and happier, require far less intervention on transition to the laying farm, and are more likely to meet and even exceed breed targets.”

At 61 weeks of age Gwen’s flock continues to thrive. Production is very good at 92.6% HD, with egg weight of 63.5g. Floor eggs are well under control and below average, and the birds have excellent feather cover. Gwen is delighted with the results, and confirms “Humphrey Feeds & Pullets and the support of their Poultry Specialists have made a real difference to our bottom line.”
