



The University of Georgia

Cooperative Extension Service

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HATCHERY/BREEDER TIP...

MANAGING THE FLOCK THE FIRST WEEKS IN LAYING HOUSE

What are some of the critical details of producing successful breeder flocks year in and year out? Let's review a few key parts of a critical time period, the first month after housing.

At housing have the facility fully prepared. The most important days in a breeder pullet or cockerels productive life (besides the brooding period) are the first 2-5 days after the birds are moved into the laying house. The first and second feeding periods can make the difference between a fair to average flock and one that makes the integrator and the grower a profit. If the pullets don't get on the slats and eat/drink these first few days, they may never lay an egg or very few eggs. The problem for the cockerel is worse as he has to find his feeder in the scratch area and then find water on the slats. If they don't find these essentials quickly, these birds will be your culls. The percentage of cull birds in a flock is directly related to how quickly the birds adjust to these new surroundings. If we lose birds at this point --what a waste!

Let's make it easy on the birds. Lower those slats if you haven't already. All that is necessary is 18-20 inches of space for the manure to collect. With the addition of 3-6 inches of shavings to the floor, the birds can easily get up on the slats. When possible, move the birds from the same type feeder and drinker in the pullet house to similar equipment in the hen house (trough to trough, pan to pan, nipple to nipple, etc.). This is especially important in the case of the cockerel. Some cockerels get caught up in the mass rush of the pullets going to feeders on the slats and get confused when they cannot get anything much to eat. By the time the confused cockerel realizes his error all the feed is gone from the rooster feeder. Both the grower and field representative should be present the first morning after birds are moved. There is sometimes a difference of opinion about how well birds got to feed and water. Feed amount is not so critical the first few days. Making sure that every bird gets some feed and water is more important than feeding the appropriate amount of feed. Catch a few birds and feel for feed in their crops to determine the percentage of birds that have not found feed and water.

Some flocks go to the feed and water with little or no assistance while in other flocks, hens will need to be put on the slats or cockerels in the scratch for several days. This is really hard work, but well worth it. I find the flock that roosts on the slats their first night in the house will be there waiting for feed when the lights come on the next morning. A few hours invested that first evening getting the birds on the slats makes the next morning a little easier.

PUTTING KNOWLEDGE TO WORK

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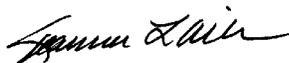
Having people walking around the house seems to calm the birds and helps them settle into their new surroundings.

While you are observing the first feeding time, check to determine if the rooster feeder is at the right height. During clean out floor height and evenness may change and shaving depth is usually different from flock to flock causing feeder height problems. If pans have feed in them and no birds are around those pans, some individual pans may need to be lowered. Sometimes people go several days before realizing that the roosters cannot reach all the pans. By the time the problem is recognized, some of the cockerels are well on their way to being part of the first week's mortality. Along the same lines, do you have a large number of pullets eating with the cockerels? The feed line may not be high enough to keep the pullets out. Male feed allotments are so small that just a little stealing by the hens can affect the roosters. Another critical question to ask is whether the male feeder is staying charged (auger is full of feed)? The number of pans dropping feed may need to be decreased to match the volume of feed to assure that the auger stays full of feed. Rooster uniformity will suffer from a change in feed volume when the line is not charged properly.

It must be obvious by now that if the facility was not completely ready when the flock was housed, the grower will not have time to get it ready after the birds arrive. All the equipment must be functional. Between most flock placements there is always some repair, maintenance or upkeep to complete. Sometimes the grower is given a short time between flocks, or perhaps needed equipment parts did not come in on time. Whatever the case — the birds need our undivided attention during these first weeks after moving. And certainly, if some piece of equipment is not working correctly, the first few days is the time to determine this and immediately correct it.

Within the first 2-3 weeks after moving, the maturing hens will seek a nest site. If the birds are moved at 21-22 weeks of age, have the nests ready and lower them the first 2-4 days after the birds are moved into the laying house. Essentially, as soon as most birds are getting up on the slats, lower the nests. If you are moving the birds at 20-21 weeks of age, you can wait 7-10 days before lowering the nests. Again, having nests clean, pads or bottoms in place, and belts adjusted will allow the grower to lower them at the appropriate time to encourage good nest site selection.

Have the house ready for the birds. The time between placement and peak egg production is a busy time of checking to make sure the birds are eating, drinking and all the equipment is working the way it should. It is not a time to finish major repairs or renovations. Spend time monitoring how well the birds are getting on the slats, finding the nests, and acclimating to their new environment. Check lists are not a bad idea so that growers and field representatives can be certain the facility is ready for the next flock. When a flock settlement is complete and we are trying to determine why a flock did not perform, we tend to forget how prepared we were to help this flock perform.



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****Consult with your poultry company representative before making management changes****

“Your local County Extension Agent is a source of more information on this subject.”