ELM FARM RESEARCH CENTRE

RESEARCH BRIEFING NOTE

RESEARCH INTO THE PREVELANCE OF HOCK AND BREAST BURNS

There has been recent coverage in the national press relating to the welfare of both broiler and organic chickens. In particular the Daily Telegraph (26/07/2005) published an article on the suffering of chickens on farms due to burns. This article stated that 'eight out of 10 supermarket chickens have suffered potentially painful chemical burns, either on their bodies or legs'.

This is certainly not the case at Sheepdrove Organic Farm where recent research showed less than three out of 100 birds with any sign of such burns due to the extremely high welfare standards in place.

The study in the Telegraph article quotes data on 'burns and marks'; scientifically referred to as contact dermatitis. Contact dermatitis can be superficial, like the 'marks' suggested in the study, but can also be large lesions with deep ulcers. Severe contact dermatitis can cause welfare problems, but small marks are not noted as a welfare issue.

'Marks' on the hocks of chickens are superficial and appear as small, light or dark brown patches on the rear of the hock. Burns are much larger and can cover the entire rear of the hock - perhaps as large as a two pence piece. These have a scabby and black appearance.

The data from the article states that 80 per cent of the British Farm Standard broiler chickens inspected from supermarket shelves had marks and 82 per cent had burns. Of these animals 42 per cent suffered from medium or large burns. The article went on to relate data on organic birds as well; stating 42 per cent of the organic chickens observed had burns.

Elm Farm Research centre has carried out extensive poultry research at Sheepdrove Organic Farm which has involved the recording of marks and burns on the bodies and hocks of organic table birds. In our study of over 800 birds, ninety seven per cent had no burns and only 27 per cent had superficial marks on the hocks. Less than three per cent of all the birds sampled exhibited small or medium burns. None of the birds in the sample displayed any evidence of marks or burns on the breast - a severe form of contact dermatitis.

The results are summarised overleaf.

Burn Type	Percentage of birds
No mark or burn	70.5
Small superficial mark	26.8
Small burn	2.3
Medium burn	0.4
Severe/large burn	0.0

Table 1. Prevalence of hock marks and burn in Sheepdrove sample birds

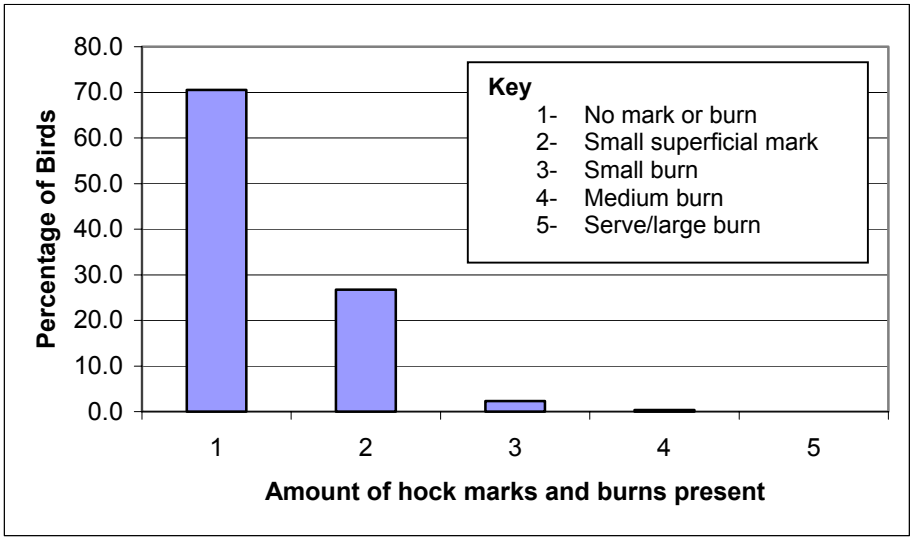

Figure 1. Prevalence of hock marks and burn in Sheepdrove sample birds

The results, published in the article, give a combined figure for the percentage of burns and marks encompassing data on leg and breast burn. As the Sheepdrove birds suffered no breast burns the overall figure is the same as that for hock burn, with just twenty seven per cent of the Sheepdrove birds marked and less than 3 per cent exhibiting burns. This compares very favourably with the data from the article for both conventional and other organic birds.

The results in this Elm Farm Research study suggest good hock welfare for the Sheepdrove flock, as there are very low levels of hock burn. This reflects the conditions on the farm that promote positive welfare amongst the free-range birds with plenty of raised perches and enhanced space.

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EFRC , Research Department , Hamstead Marshall, Newbury, UK RG20 0HR

Tel +44 (0)1488 658298 fax +44 (0)1488 658503

email : research@efrc.com www.efrc.com *or* www.organicresearchcentre.com