

GETTING OFF TO A GOOD START

NFU Poultry hears how a successful pullet delivery leads to a productive flock

A great deal of care and attention goes into the first 16 weeks of a pullet's life so that it leaves the rearing farm, and arrives on the laying farm, in prime condition to start producing eggs. However, that work can be set back significantly if the birds' move to the laying house does not go smoothly.

One of the main contributors to a healthy and productive laying flock are low levels of stress throughout the birds' life, but being caught, vaccinated, loaded onto a lorry and transported to a new environment can involve an element of anxiety.

If birds come into lay around three to four weeks after delivery, as they should, it is crucial that delivery goes well, and the key to a good delivery is preparation, care and speed at every stage.

PRE-DELIVERY

Preparation time is critical for establishing a new flock. Humphrey Feeds and Pullets encourages customers to visit its rearing farms to see for themselves the progress of their birds, weigh them, and assess them against the weekly reports of the birds' development.

Former Poultry Industry Programme participant James Wilson is part of the network of poultry specialists who works for Humphrey Feeds and Pullets, covering mid Wales and the border counties. He is involved in the delivery process from beginning to end.

"Most of our customers have plastic slated

floors in their laying houses and, therefore, as their pullet supplier, we try to replicate this environment in the rearing shed so that the birds become familiar and associate them with somewhere to roost," said James.

"The aim of a good delivery is to get the birds out of the transport modules so they can feed and drink as soon as possible.

"Birds don't like things they are not used to and may not move around so freely if the new environment is significantly different from the rearing farm, and if they have not been trained sufficiently to explore upwards on the systems in the rearing house."

James also works with his producers to ensure their farms are ready to receive their delivery by the due date.

PULLET LOADING

"The careful handling of the birds throughout the loading is very important and we are sensitive to that," said James.

"When it comes to moving day, the birds are caught by both legs and vaccinated before being placed into the transport module trays."

"We try and replicate the laying house environment in the rearing sheds"

A producer may think that this would slow down the process, leading to greater stress, but

James and the team of professional catchers work quickly and carefully.

It typically takes them four to five hours to load two lorries with 16,000 birds and two hours to unload at the other end – depending upon the system in the laying house.

We usually load 33 birds to a draw but if



the weather is warm, that number is reduced.

THE MOVE

Humphrey Feeds and Pullets transport the birds overnight where possible for several important reasons:

- Roads are less congested so journey time is reduced.
- Temperatures are lower.
- Birds do not miss out on a day of feed and water.
- Early morning arrival gives staff at their destination the maximum amount of time to unload and settle the birds.

PULLET ARRIVAL

As soon as the delivery truck arrives, the modules are offloaded exactly where the farmer wants them, and James is there to lend a hand, unloading immediately.

A PRODUCER'S PERSPECTIVE

For experienced award-winning poultry farmer Susie Macmillan of Macs Farm in East Sussex, a smooth pullet delivery is a key element in ensuring a productive flock.

"Ensuring the delivery of our pullets is as stress free as possible is crucial to us as this is a time when the birds' internal organs are at such a precious stage and we want to avoid any damage to them.

"Delivery is an anxious time for the flock and thanks to the team at Humphrey Feeds & Pullets the birds arrive calm and settle quickly which is important as a smooth unloading process always leads to better production.

"Being able to see your birds being reared is vital. It is important to put the effort in so that when they arrive on farm you have done everything possible to help them get off to a good start."

"The quicker you get them out of the module the quicker they get to feed and water"

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"It is all down to numbers, and usually the producer will have several helpers there," said James. "We may have some modules waiting for a couple of hours to be unloaded so we monitor them and make sure they don't get too hot.

"Having enough helpers is important

because the quicker you get them out of the module the quicker they get to feed and water, which should always be there waiting for them."

PULLET FOLLOW UP

Once the birds are in their house, James can assess how well the delivery has gone by how they subsequently behave. If they are feeding and drinking, and making the right noises, then it has gone well.

Visits continue on a routine basis, usually around once a week, to monitor the birds' health and progress against breed statistics.

"Farmers like the fact that we are there," said James.

"We can give them advice on the lighting, ventilation, feed and environment, so that they come on to lay as they should."