Risk factors for abnormal behaviour (feather pecking) in birds kept for egg-laying in Canada: An Epidemiological Study

Positions available: 1 Post-Doctoral fellow (2 years), 1 MSc (2 years) in the Department of Animal Bioscience and the Campbell Centre for the Study of Animal Welfare at the University of Guelph, Canada

Start date: January 2017

The goal of this study is to identify risk factors for feather pecking (FP) behaviour in pullets/laying hen flocks that are specific to Canadian farming conditions. We want to develop a Canadian FP Management Plan which will help farmers i) assess the FP status of their flocks, ii) identify potential risks for this behaviour, and iii) provide specific and Canadian-tailored solutions that will help prevent and/or reduce FP altogether.

To achieve this goal, we will begin by identifying the risk factors for FP in pullet and laying hen flocks in alternative housing systems through a collaborative approach across different research fields (PI’s): Dr. Harlander, Dr. Widowski - animal welfare scientist; Dr. Baes - geneticist; Dr. Berke - statistical epidemiologist.

We are looking for a highly motivated postdoctoral candidate who can confidently lead this project and an MSc candidate who will support the Post-Doc Fellow with aspects of data collection comprising their thesis research. This project will involve the organization and creation of a detailed questionnaire, data analysis and interpretation, and application of qualitative health risk assessments. Applicants should have a PhD (or BSc for MSc applicants) in biological sciences, epidemiology, or related fields. Experience in interacting with farm personnel and practicing good field research etiquette is an asset.

The successful applicants will have excellent communication skills (oral and written), as frequent communication with a host of farmers, stakeholders and collaborators will be organizing meetings as necessary throughout the project. While help and guidance will always be available from PI's, the successful candidates are expected to take initiative for this project and to make autonomous decisions regarding the project specifics. The post doctoral fellow and the MSc student are expected to communicate project findings in form of scientific publications, conference presentations, and progress reports for funding bodies.

The successful candidates will join members of one of the world’s largest and dynamic interdisciplinary groups of scientists and graduate students focusing on animal welfare (http://www.uoguelph.ca/csaw/). The University of Guelph, located in southwestern Ontario is one hour from Toronto, and home to the Ontario Agricultural College (Canada’s largest and most renowned agricultural college) and the Ontario Veterinary College (ranked number 4 of vet schools in the world in 2015). Qualified applicants should submit a cover letter detailing their previous research experiences and current interests, their up-to-date curriculum vitae showing a strong academic record and the contact information for three qualified references to Dr. Harlander (project leader) by email at: aharland@uoguelph.ca

Review of applications will begin immediately and will continue until suitable candidates are found.