

Get the drinker lines empty

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It is often said that water is the most important nutrient in animal production. Although most people are aware of this, all too often we do not consider the water management as being very critical. In that respect we focus more on feed amounts, and as long as the water meter shows reasonable values we do not care too much, which is most of the times correct.

Water management is an important tool in breeder flocks to keep the litter dry. As broiler breeders are always restricted in their feed allowance and can finish their feed very quickly, unlimited water supplies will sometimes result in over consumption and spilling of water, as birds are looking for means to fill their crop and start playing with the drinkers.

To avoid wet litter, both bell drinkers and nipple drinkers are often kept at very low water flow rates, especially when the water availability is not restricted in time. This by itself is not often a problem, but when we are restricting the water availability, either in flow or in time, we have to be careful to not create too much competition.

For optimal performances, a broiler breeder flock needs to be uniform in body weight and development. This is not only the case in rearing and at transfer, but also during the production period. As broiler breeders are restricted in their feed amount, competition will quickly result in a difference in condition and body weight between birds, and non-optimal peaks will be the result.

Not only high density and limited feeder space will have a negative influence on the competition and therefore on the uniformity and production results, but water restriction can play a role as well. If the water restriction is too severe, some birds will be so thirsty that they cannot easily eat their feed as they will need to drink first. Of course this will mean that they spend time on the drinkers while other, less thirsty birds are already starting to eat. And especially when the birds are restricted in water by a very low water level in the bell drinkers or a low water flow in the nipple drinkers, it will take time before they have consumed enough water to be able to go to the feeders.

A typical sign for this is when there are birds staying at the drinker lines when the feeders start, especially when feed (and water) is given directly after light goes on. These birds will most probably be so thirsty that they will first wait for the water before they will go to the feeders. When the feeding starts, all birds should go to the feeders. If there are birds drinking at that time, it's a clear indication that the water management needs to be evaluated. It is a good practice to check this on a regular base. Sometimes the water levels are turned down more and more during the production cycle to deal with the litter quality, resulting all of a sudden in too much restriction, lack of uniformity and loss of production.

When water needs to be restricted to keep the litter dry, consider restriction in time as well as restriction in flow. Turning off the water in the afternoon, some hours before the lights are off, is often a very good practice to control excessive water consumption. Especially with bell drinkers, the hours of drinking can be restricted quite radically to avoid water spillage. With nipple drinkers we usually give longer period of water, as the birds will spill less but will also need more time to uptake a sufficient amount of water.

We often consider a water to feed ratio of 2 to 2,2 to be a sufficient ratio, when we are not dealing with excessive climate conditions. In moderate climate conditions we often use a water to feed ratio of 1,8 to 2. The right restriction program is not equal in every situation, as it depends on the system, the feed, the climate and other factors. Also medical treatments will often increase the need for water. In any case, the crops need to be soft at the end of the water period. If the crops are still hard, we have to increase the water availability, to allow the birds to digest the feed properly.

To judge if the water restriction is sufficient we have to not only look at the water meter, but also and especially to the condition and the behavior of the birds. The birds will tell us if we are applying the right management for them, we only have to listen.