

Don't get their heads stuck: the male story

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During production, males are normally excluded from the female feeders by a grill or a wooden board, that restricts them by the size of their head. This is a very effective way to control their feed intake and body weight, and is a very useful tool to keep them in condition and maintain their fertility. In another article we discuss the problems that might occur for females if the grill size is too much restricted. If we are not careful, not only the smallest male will be excluded from the female feeder, but also the biggest female, and a drop in production might be the result.

However, being excluded from the female feeder is not only a problem concerning the females. Early in production, the combs and waffles of the males are small, and they can easily eat with the females. This by itself is not a problem, as at that moment there is no need for a strict control of their body weight yet, and especially the less dominant and smaller males will be able to catch up in size and weight before being forced to meet their more dominant companions. However, after a limited number of weeks the males will have developed so much that they cannot eat from the female feeder anymore. It's not equal for each flock and each line, but usually we see that around 26 weeks of age, the last males cannot eat with the females anymore, and are excluded from the system.

It is important to observe the eating behavior carefully during this period, as we have to adjust our feeding amounts accordingly. If we only would observe the condition and the body weight of the males, we can be tricked. Until 25-26 weeks the males will grow well on a very limited feed amount, as a number of males will be eating from the female system. But all of a sudden the males will start losing condition, as more males have to eat from the same limited amount of feed and cannot steal from the females anymore. This is very risky, because if males will lose too much condition in this period, their quality can deteriorate very quickly and they will have a problem staying dominant and compete with the other males.

So what could be a practical way of handling the feed amounts during this transition period, from transfer to about 26 weeks of age. A workable approach is to determine the percentage of males that is actually eating with the females, as a percentage of the total number of males. If for instance 50% of the males is eating with the females, half of the total feed amount for the males can be added to the female feed. When the number of males that can eat with the female gradually reduces as they are growing out of the system, the percentage of the male feed that is added to the female feeding system can be adjusted accordingly.

Dividing the feed precisely according to the distribution of the males over the male and female feeding system doesn't automatically mean that all the males will get the same amount of feed. Males typically eat faster than females, as can be seen if we observe the feed consumption time of the male feed and compare it with the female feed. Also the competition between the males is higher than in the females, which can also be seen clearly if we observe the behavior of males and females during feeding. This means that males that are still eating with the females will have a relatively higher share of feed than the males that have to compete with the other males for the feed in the male feeders. However, this is not necessarily bad, as these smaller males can use a bit more feed to let them develop a bit faster and become more competitive with the other males. As they will quickly grow themselves out of the female feeders, this will be corrected automatically.

In theory, the females have slightly less feed available as the males will take more than their calculated share. However, this difference is relatively small and there is no practical need to correct for it.

For an adequate feeding of both males and females, it is important to not only pay attention to the numbers and the calculations, but to also observe the condition and the behavior of the animals. And if the condition or the behavior show that things are not developing in the right way, we better pay close attention and take action, even if the numbers themselves do not give a clear indication for problems (yet).