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ON THE ROAD TO DUAL PURPOSE CHICKENS FOR EUROPE - EXPERIENCES FROM PULLET REARING IN DENMARK AND GERMANY

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The culling of hatched male layer chicks has been subject to widespread disapproval and led to its ban in Germany and France in 2022. One option to end this practice is a shift towards dual purpose breeds with a balanced performance in egg and meat production. As part of the EU project PPILOW, males and females of three dual purpose genotypes (GT) were compared in Denmark (DK) and Germany (DE) in their productivity, behavior and welfare. Here, we present the characteristics of the pullets in the rearing. Two dual purpose (A, C) and one rustic (B) GTs were selected for evaluation in this experiment: A leans towards a higher meat production, B is a rustic breed with balanced performance, and C leans towards higher egg production. In each country, a group of layers was kept as a control (D). In DK 250 chicks and in DE 80 chicks per GT were reared under organic standard and same rearing conditions for each group. They were fed a starter, a grower, a pre-lay diet based on 99-100% organic components. Data collection included feed consumption, live weight, welfare and behavior observation to study genotype-specific differences. Mortality up to week 4 ranged from 0% B in D to 6.9% A in DK. Live weights in week 4,10,18 differed significantly across all GTs and affirms breeding focus of each. Both in DK and in DE, A showed highest while D showed lowest growth. The average live weight at 18 weeks of age ranged from 1.4-1.7kg of D to 2.3-2.5kg of A in DE and DK, respectively. Fresh matter feed consumption per bird and day did not differ significantly in the starter phase (DE 26-35g; DK 15-19g) nor in the grower phase (DE 59-84g; DK 45-61g). There were significant genotype-specific differences in feed consumption in the pre-layer phase for DE (83-114g), but not in DK (81-91g). Due to technical difficulties, feed data for A in DK is excluded, explaining a lower range in feed consumption compared to DE. Studied welfare indicators show no abnormalities across GTs. Based on behavior observations in week 7,11,16 we can summarize that chicks showed high interaction with enrichment. Only minor aggressive behavior was observed. Pullet rearing is key to a successful laying period, thus promising results are expected.

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