**Old and healthy! Is that possible?**

Is it possible and reasonable to keep laying hens for a 2nd laying period?

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Since the purchase price for young hens, especially in the organic sector, has risen significantly, farmers are increasingly asking themselves the question: "Should or must I really send my laying hens herd to slaughter with an output of around 80%, or does it make sense to keep the animals even longer?

This consideration has far-reaching consequences which result from the following questions:

- A: How healthy and stable have the animals survived the first laying period?

- B: What laying performance do they have at the age of 70 weeks?

- C: What is the percentage of broken and cracked eggs at this time?

- D: Which variant is suitable for my farm: **Laying through or forced mousing?**

- E: Are there any contractual restrictions on the part of the egg purchase company?

Regarding point A: The wish of every laying hen keeper is a stable herd. This means: a calm increase in laying performance up to 94-96%, a laying performance curve as flat as possible, which only falls slowly after the 45th week, fully feathered hens, with good feed intake, calm character, no cannibalism and as few dead animals as possible. This is an enormously high expectation. In order to achieve this, the farm manager has to consider a number of things: optimum stable conditions, a good stable climate, a clean environment, sufficient light and the best possible feeding conditions.

A first challenge is the conversion from raw fibre-rich rearing feed to the calcium and protein-rich **in the laying starter period.** This period is very stressful for the young hens. On the one hand, they have to adjust to a new stable, a new herd and a completely different feed, and on the other hand, their body is hormonally and metabolically adapted to laying eggs. This is a huge challenge. One is very well advised to support the animals in this phase in addition to the normal routine. There are two complementary ways of doing this.

The use of a homeopathic stall prophylaxis whose composition aims at the following aspects:

Reduction of the consequences of stress through transport > excitement, fear, cold wind, stress;

Reduction of the consequencestress of stress by catching, unloading, various injury possibilities;

Consideration of the entire constitution of the herd, also called constitution.

On the one hand, a highly efficient feed supplement is the use of bentonite, be it zeolite or mont morillonite, which acts as a binder for free radicals and faulty fermentation products - both are caused by stress in the digestive tract and by mycotoxins. On the other hand, the prophylactic use of highly concentrated and quickly available herbs and spices whose composition is supposed to strengthen the immune system and inhibit inflammation.

Plants such as rose hips and coneflower should be mentioned here as native examples, but there is also a wide range of Indian plants available. All these requirements are combined in the product MOMO-AKTIV Agrar BALANCE.

The phase of the laying power peak follows next. The breeding programs push it higher and higher and extend the high performance longer and longer. A particularly precarious development is the use of the new breed "Sandy" for the organic sector - with their extremely high performance one tries to financially compensate the extremely bad fattening performance of the brother cocks. Apart from the marketing gag, the BIO idea is completely absent for me here!

Regarding points B and C: If the herd comes into the last third of the 1st laying period, animal health, the laying performance curve and number of broken and cracked eggs are decisive parameters. Usually the first signs of organ fatigue occur in this phase. On the one hand the liver of the animals is chronically overstrained, and on the other hand the absorption capacity of the intestine decreases. Sufficient pick feed, pregerminated grains and the possibility of absorbing natural material in the outlet improves the digestive performance of the intestine. If the animals with a laying performance of less than 90% are supported with the correspondingly composed herbal products, such as MOMO-AKTIV agrar-HEPAR and MOMO-AKTIV-agrar-MOBIL, the proportion of broken and cracked eggs can be kept below 3-4%. Such a herd, with largely intact feathering and few animal losses, is fit for a second laying period.

Regarding point D: Laying through or forced mousing? If one simply lets the herd go beyond the 72nd week of life, the average lower laying performance must be taken into account by slightly lowering the energy content in the feed. The crude protein content, added fat oils, methionine, should be slightly reduced to slow down the proportion of too large eggs, the minerals, especially calcium in quantity and grain size, must be optimally balanced and the intestine must be maintained healthy and active to achieve an optimal absorption performance. This can be effectively supported by the continued use of herbs during the 2nd laying period. So it is well possible to keep stable herds until the laying performance drops by 65%. This is the value from which the expenditure costs are no longer covered. The lower laying performance is compensated in any case by the investment saved for the purchase of a new herd. Therefore, in only two herds needs to be invested for three periods. Economically this is in any case worth considering and possibly an at least equally good sales argument for animal protection sensitized consumers, like cock fattening, if it were promoted!

The other alternative is the forced moult, where the animals with a remaining laying performance of about 80% are forced by short-term (2-3 days) feed and water withdrawal, then slow feeding with laying starter to reduce the laying performance to zero. This is achieved after about 3 weeks. From this point on, one starts again, as with a young herd, with constant support of the liver health through preventive herbal use.

However, it takes another 4-5 weeks until the herd has reached a stable level of 82-85% laying performance again. The percentage of broken and cracked eggs can be drastically reduced to less than 1%. It then rises again very slowly until it reaches 3-4% again after 7-8 months. Here, too, the fact that the laying performance falls below the 65% mark indicates the time for removing.

With both methods, life support performances of 450 eggs and more can be achieved. The goal of the 500 egg hen, which poultry breeders are striving to achieve with ever greater vigour, is therefore becoming ever more tangible, as long as the keeping farms are prepared to invest in absolutely optimised husbandry and feeding, as well as prophylactic health-supporting measures.

Regarding point E: There are still retail chains that contractually force their farmers to slaughter the hens after one laying period. This should be reconsidered, as it is actually a waste of valuable life.

Even high-performance hybrids can live for several years in private extensive husbandry, so why slaughter these highly specialized animals only because they reduce their astronomically high performance? Vitality and the theoretical capacity for longevity could also become a selection characteristic in genetics in the future. In cattle it has already been recognised that an extremely high milk yield, if it is not coupled with the ability to maintain at least 4 or 5 lactations, is actually uneconomical and ethically questionable. Should these considerations perhaps also be taken into consideration for laying hens?