



## Reducing predation of free ranging hens

### Problem

Free range systems for laying hens are becoming more popular in Spain due to their perceived welfare benefits for the hens. However, the producers reported the problem of high mortality levels (up to 30% mortality rate) that are unsustainable. The producers highlighted predation as one of the main cause of death. Birds of prey such as the common buzzard were particularly difficult to control as they hunt during the day when the hens are outside and their attacks are unpredictable. Moreover, the common buzzard is a widespread and a legally protected species. Beyond the direct effects of the predatory attacks, the network reported that their hens appear tense and agitated after an attack and were reluctant to access the outdoor area for several days following the attack. Furthermore, producers noted a possible relationship between the incidence of injurious pecking and the frequency of attacks from birds.

### Solution

The presence of alpacas on a farm, sharing the outdoor area with the hens can successfully reduce the number of attacks of predators. Alpacas are territorial, with males gathering and defending females within their territories. Alpacas are typically aggressive toward predators and appear to readily bond with other animals and aggressively protect them.

### Application box

**Theme:** Predation

**Production system:** Free range

**Stock:** Laying hens (organic)

**Equipment:** Alpacas animal husbandry equipment e.g. roofed shelter, feed, water supply, vaccination and deworming



### Benefit – outcome

- Reduced mortality and stress and consequently reduce Feather Pecking in free ranging hens.
- Besides being a very significant economic problem, predation can originate social conflicts between authorities and producers claiming for their animals' loss.

## Practical recommendation

- Use young male alpacas (between 1 and 3 years old) that have been socialised with people and hens.
- Alpacas are highly sociable animals and should not be introduced as a single animal.

## Points to consider

1. Alpacas do not need training to protect the range. However, they need an adaptation period of around 3 weeks to get use to their new surrounding and get more confident.
2. Daily positive and friendly interaction between the farmer and the alpacas is essential: giving some food, gently touching them and checking if the animals do not have any health problem.
3. Once a week the alpacas should be manipulate with a headcollar for them to get used to it. This will allow the farmer to easily grab the animals if necessary (ex. For health treatment or to move the alpacas to another paddock).
4. A male alpaca may cost around 500-700 euros/animal, but this may vary depending of the type of fibre the animal has and the country. A comfortable roofed shelter is necessary. Clean and fresh water and roughage should be provided ad libitum.
5. Normally there is little cost associated with looking after them: diet based in roughage, some mineral and vitamine supplementation, toenail trimmed, vaccination and worming. However, be aware that alpacas should be sheared once a year. Except in UK, alpacas sheperd are scarce and the shearing process can become a stressful event!

## Further Information

If you have any specific question about this technical note, please contact the author of by email: Déborah Temple at: [Deborah.Temple@uab.cat](mailto:Deborah.Temple@uab.cat)

If you are a spanish speaker have a look at : <http://www.mascastanyer.cat/les-alpaques/>

For further information on ways to reduce Feather Pecking have a look at the HenHub: [www.HenHub.eu](http://www.HenHub.eu)

## About this technical note and the Hennovation project

**Author:** Déborah Temple

**Editor:** Lisa van Dijk

**Hennovation project:** This technical note was developed as part of the Hennovation project. The project ran from January 2015 to August 2017. The project enabled practice-driven innovation through the establishment of innovation networks of farmers and within the laying hen production industry that were facilitated to proactively search for, share and use new ideas to improve hen welfare, efficiency and sustainability.

**Project website:** [www.hennovation.eu](http://www.hennovation.eu)

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