

Three stars for animal welfare

The Rondeel housing system offers laying hens variety and space. Wageningen provided scientific knowledge and headed the design process. Consumers were involved in the design too.

TEXT AND PHOTOGRAPHY HANS WOLKERS



In 2010, poultry farmer Timon Brandsen from Barneveld became the first person to have a Rondeel building in the Netherlands. ‘Sustainability through smart energy savings and responsible feed coupled with animal welfare,’ is how Brandsen summarizes the Rondeel concept. ‘The birds stay indoors but we bring nature into the barn.’ Tree trunks produce height differences while variation in the litter used ensures places for hens to forage, take a dust bath or bask in the sun, or to hide.

The Netherlands has 3.5 million laying hens, over 80 percent of which have free-range facilities – inside the barn. ‘But their welfare could be improved substantially,’ says Bram Bos, researcher at Wageningen Livestock Research. ‘The high hen population density doesn’t give them enough room for natural behaviour. That results in stress and aggression. Beak trimming then becomes necessary. To improve the welfare of hens, Bos and his fellow researchers headed a design process

that involved poultry farmers and consumers. This resulted in a new housing concept: the Rondeel barn. It was not easy to sell the new system, which is more labour-intensive and takes up more space, making it more expensive.

ARTIFICIAL GRASS

On the other hand, this is the first housing system that takes account of the needs of farmers, hens and consumers, says Bos. ‘Consumers are often right about how you should treat animals.’ Many people think hens need straw, for instance. But that’s not so convenient for farmers. Behavioural researchers concluded that artificial grass was a good alternative: nice for the hens and a practical solution for farmers. In this way, the Rondeel housing system combines knowledge of animal behaviour, innovative technology, farmers’ interests and consumers’ perceptions. And the Rondeel barn scores three stars for animal welfare, the

same as organic poultry farms. Conventional free-range barns hold hundreds of thousands of chickens but Brandsen’s Rondeel barn only contains ten flocks of 3000 chickens each. That is a manageable number but it is labour-intensive. ‘I check to see if the birds are okay twice a day,’ says Brandsen. ‘The hens’ weight, the eggs they have laid and the feed intake are measured automatically. That gives a good picture of their health.’ Rondeel eggs fetch a good price; they cost about 29 cents an egg, over 10 cents more than standard free-range eggs. So Brandsen earns a good living. The firm Rondeel BV takes all the eggs from the five Dutch Rondeel barns for a fixed price. ‘That means guaranteed sales and income,’ says Brandsen. ‘Rondeel is the best for farmers, consumers and poultry. You feel like a proper farmer again; it’s a good deal.’ ■

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‘Good for farmers, hens and consumers’

