

Solution To Ascites 'A Genetic One,' Says Poultry Researcher

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accounted for 60-70 percent of the mortality.

"Genetic selection has markedly decreased the ability of the chicken to respond to environmental changes," said Barbato. "Birds are being pushed to the brink as fast as they can grow."

While ascites affects more broilers than layers, layers aren't affected because of the "hybrid vigor" in their genetic selection. This vigor allows them to "hide" the problems more readily, according to the professor. Hens become more adaptable to changes in the environment.

In 1945, it took 93-95 days to obtain a 3.5-pound broiler. In 1990, it took only 35 days to obtain a 3.5-pound bird. In the year 2000, it is projected, it will only take 23-25 days to grow a 3.5-pound broiler.

The genetic selection for this fast growth has limited the gene pool of adaptability. The less days to growout, the more energy is needed for growth. That takes away energy needed to adapt to cool or cold conditions. As much as 85-90 percent of the increases in ascites can be attributed to genetic selection, according to the

researcher.

Penn State reproduced conditions to bring on the onset of ascites in broilers in a trial. They used the "cool" model—after the birds reached 14 days of age, researchers lowered the ambient temperature to 55 degrees F. What they found out was that the longer the exposure to the cool conditions, the greater the incidence of ascites in the flock.

"What cures ascites? Probably nothing right now," said Barbato. The answer lies in not curing it, but preventing it with "solid management," he said.

The professor suggested that producers ensure the birds receive good ventilation year-round. Also, keep the birds warm. One study looked at feed restrictions to lessen the stress of growout, but what the research found was that, although ascites was reduced dramatically, there was a decrease in total breast weight.

"The bottom line is that it depends on what you're selling—more birds or more breast yield," he said. "You must decide what's important to you."

Research indicates that there are some "exciting options" that are still under review and may be presented to poultry producers in the

year to come.

But, as the days to growout decline, there might be a point

"Where all the good management in the world won't help," he said. Any perturbation will push the

disease.

"Ultimately, the solution has to be a genetic one," he said.



Dr. Guy Barbato, associate professor of poultry science, left, spoke to more than 30 broiler and layer managers and other industry personnel at the Poultry Management and Health Seminar at Kreider's Restaurant on Monday. Here, he speaks to David Graybill, Pennfield broiler flock manager, center while Dr. Nuket Acar, post-doc student, looks on.

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