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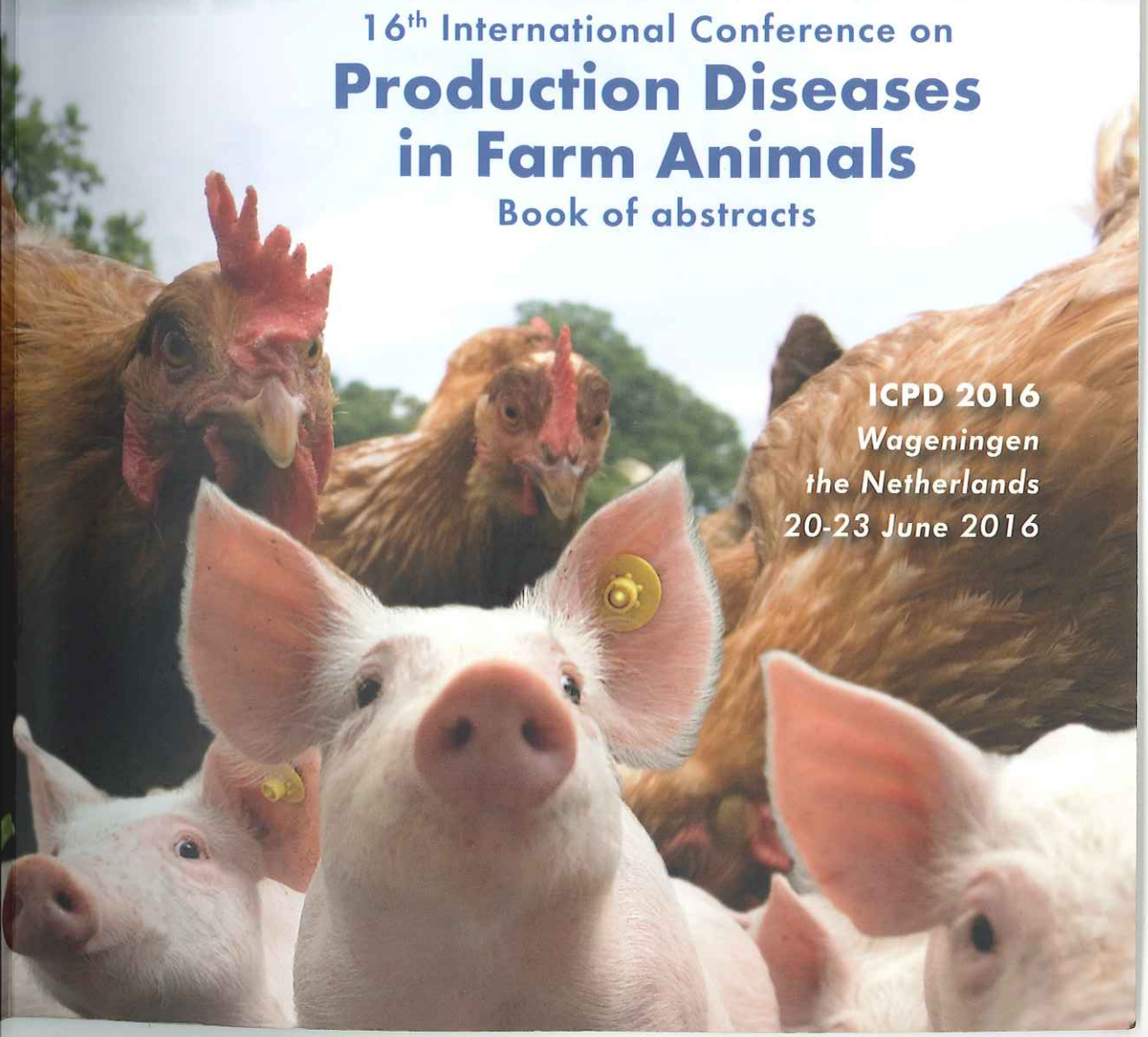

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Feather pecking and cannibalism in 107 organic laying hen flocks in 8 European countries

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The aim of our study was to get insight in feather and cannibalism in organic laying hens, its relations with husbandry practices and give recommendations for farmers and policy makers on how to reduce feather pecking and cannibalism. In 8 European countries 107 organic layer farms were visited. Information were collected regarding management, flock, vaccinations, medical treatments, feeding, housing, range management and specific problems. At the end of lay, 50 hens per flock were assessed for plumage condition and wounds at the neck, back, belly and tail. Potential factors related to the percentages of 'hens affected' were analyzed by partial correlation analyses for all continuous and categorical variables. Dichotomous variables were analyzed by means of linear regression. Fifteen percent of the flocks had severe feather damage, 20% had moderate and 65% had little/no feather damage. Less feather damage was found if pre-lay feed was fed shorter, less different feed phases were fed, in case of higher protein and methionine feed content, higher percentage of hens in the wintergarten, higher percentage of hens on the free-range, less often dewormed, lower number of alternative treatments, application of litter replacement or topping, no roughage provided during rearing, offering daylight and no needle vaccination after rearing. Les wounds were found if pre-lay feed was fed shorter, less different feed phases were fed, in case of higher protein content, lower degree of red mites infestation, needle vaccination given at placement, higher calcium feed content and litter topping. We recommend considering free-choice feeding, stimulating the use of the wintergarten and the free range area, litter management to ensure loose and dry litter, provision of daylight and the prevention of red mites. Free-choice feeding is offering the feed divided in for example protein and energy components, from which the hens can choose according to their needs. Moreover, we recommend policy makers to harmonize the compliance of EU-regulations for organic production in the different countries.