

First GroupHouseNet STSM completed: Katarina Pichova from the Slovak Academy of Sciences, Slovakia to Wageningen University, The Netherlands

Feather pecking represents a serious welfare problem in laying hens. It is much more difficult to control it in large groups since it is problematic to identify the bird performing damaging behaviour. Research on genetic lines selected divergently on high and low feather pecking may contribute to understanding of the mechanisms that underlie this behaviour. During my short term scientific mission, I visited Dr. Bas Rodenburg at the Behavioural Ecology Group of Wageningen University, who together with his team is currently investigating behavioural, physiological and immunological differences between the two genetic lines of laying hens selected divergently for feather pecking behaviour. I had an opportunity to work with a unique system for automatic recording of behavior called the PhenoLab. This system tracks individual birds in a group using ultra-wideband sensing. I participated on identification of relevant measures of poultry behaviour that could be measured automatically. First results confirm the previously found data showing that high feather pecking birds are less fearful and show higher motor activity compared with low feather pecking birds. High feather pecking hens also spent more time in zone with access to foraging material than low feather pecking hens. Use of the TrackLab software (part of the PhenoLab) proved to be feasible for objective assessment of behaviour.

My short term scientific mission was an opportunity for me to work in a laboratory with top specialists on unique equipment. It motivated me to the further work in this field and provided me with a lot of new ideas. I believe that the personal contacts made during this mission will also mean the start of a collaboration between Wageningen University and my home laboratory.