

Statement concerning the ban on inclusion of synthetic amino acids in the diets of organically reared monogastric (poultry and pigs) livestock in the EU Regulation 1804/99

By Network for Animal Health and Welfare in Organic Agriculture (NAHWOA)

NAHWOA is a network of researchers from 17 different institutes in 13 European countries. All partners work in organic livestock production research and are specialised in animal health and welfare, breeding, feeding and resource management in organic livestock systems (a list of partner organisations and contacts enclosed). For the past three years, the network activities have been funded by the EU as a Concerted Action project (FAIR6 - CT98 – 4405).

Partners in the NAHWOA are aware that the use of synthetic amino acids (sAA's) in poultry and pig diets in organic production systems is prohibited by the EU Regulation 1804/99 and by the standards of the International Federation of Organic Agriculture Movements (IFOAM). The partnership is also aware of the request by some of the member countries to introduce into the Regulation a derogation that would allow the inclusion of sAA's in organically managed pig and poultry diets for a limited period of time. The request for a derogation to allow the use of sAA's in organic systems is based, among others, on the objective to prevent feather pecking and cannibalism in poultry and to guarantee adequate diets for growing poultry and piglets in the absence of suitable organically produced diets on the market.

At a recent workshop of NAHWOA in Denmark (November 2001), the proposed derogation was discussed. Based on these discussions, the partnership makes the following points:

- Feather pecking and cannibalism are behavioural problems in poultry. The aetiology of this behavioural disturbance is not fully understood, but it is generally accepted that the problem is multifactorial, and that the prevalence of feather pecking and cannibalism is high even in conventional free range systems, where sAA's are included in the poultry diets (Green *et al.*, 2000). Research carried out in organic layer flocks in Holland suggests that stockmanship and environmental management are important factors in the prevention of these conditions (Bestman, 2000). The NAHWOA partnership feels that inclusion of sAA's in organic

poultry diets will have little effect in preventing feather pecking and cannibalism, unless other risk factors are also considered.

- Requirements for essential amino acids in an individual animal are primarily determined by nitrogen retention and growth rate that, in turn, are determined by the animal's genetic production potential. Consequently, these requirements can be influenced by breeding. The NAHWOA partnership feels that breeding and selection of suitable animals for organic systems should be the primary strategy to solve the problem.
- There are currently various compounds rich in essential amino acids available within the European livestock feed market (organic soya bean, skim milk powder, potato protein, maize gluten etc.). It is suggested that the choice of specific feeds rich in essential amino acids is primarily a function of price rather than availability. The NAHWOA partnership feels that the financial argument has poor validity in a value added production system, such as organic poultry and pig production.
- The NAHWOA partnership considers that sAA's amino acids are primarily a means to increase performance and to intensify production, and as such are not within the letter or the spirit of the current EU regulations on organic production. There is, therefore, a need to adjust expectations on the production levels that are feasible in organic monogastric systems.
- There is further a need to adjust the breeding goals for monogastric livestock to suit the requirements of organic production principles (land based, closed nutrient cycles, sustainable production), rather than to adjust organic standards to suit the currently available commercial breeding and feed production schemes.
- Furthermore, there are many organic pig and poultry producers in different member countries who have developed systems that function well in the absence of sAA use. These producers have often made considerable financial investments to develop such systems, and have successfully created a premium market for products from these systems, under the organic label. There is, therefore, a need to utilise the existing information on alternatives to sAA's and to safeguard consumer confidence in the value added product, created by the organic producers who have been successful in operating under the current regulation that prohibits sAA use.
- The partnership, however, recognises the fact that, in some member states, there is a need to carry out further research in order to find breeds that are adequate to the available nutrient supply within the organic framework and to investigate the implications of different alternative sources of essential amino acids.
- If a derogation to allow the use of sAA's in the diets of organically produced pigs and poultry is introduced, the NAHOWOA partnership suggests that this would only be done subject to a presentation of an

approved research programme that will address the issue during the derogation period. The partnership further suggests that such a research programme should use methods and approaches that allow a system level assessment of alternative strategies and makes full use of the pioneering work carried out by existing organic producers who have been operating under the current regulation successfully (farm based, participatory research).

- The partnership also feels that there should be no coupling of the sAA issue with the use of synthetic vitamins in ruminant livestock. The two issues should be considered separately, as the scientific background and solutions for these issues are completely separate and should be considered on their own merit.

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References:

Green, L.E., Lewis, K., Kimpton, A. and Nicol, C. J. (2000). *Veterinary Record*, **147**, 233-238.

Bestman, M.W.P. (2001). The role of management and housing in the prevention of feather pecking in laying hens. In: *The Proceedings of the 4th NAHWOA Workshop, Clermont-Ferrand, France, 21-24 October, 2000*. 79-88.