

# Soybean Meal in Poultry Nutrition

## Soybean Meal is Ideal Protein for Poultry

Soybean meal dominates the market for protein supplements for poultry. There are a number of reasons for this, including its consistency in nutrient content, its ready availability year-round, and its high content of crude protein. Because poultry producers desire high-energy diets, soybean meal is a superior value because no other common plant protein feedstuff exceeds soybean meal in crude protein content. Soybean meal matches or exceeds all other common plant proteins in both total and digestible amino acid content (Table 1). Soybean meal is perhaps the only common protein supplement that is typically included in poultry rations with no limitation as to the quantity used. When properly toasted to denature the trypsin inhibitors, there are no antinutritive factors to consider when formulating diets.

With the single exception of methionine, soybean meal is an almost ideal protein supplement for all types of poultry. When blended with corn or grain sorghum, soybean meal provides a good balance of all the essential amino acids needed by poultry except for methionine. However, methionine is economically provided by supplements produced by the chemical industry, allowing simple corn-soybean meal diets to effectively meet the amino acid requirements of the chick.

## History of Usage in Poultry Diets

Given the overwhelming use of soybean meal in poultry feeds today, it is difficult to imagine that not much more than 50 years ago soybean meal was not the predominant protein source. In the early 1940s, manufacture of poultry feed was dominated by large flour millers, who used poultry feed as an outlet for wheat bran and other milling byproducts. Animal feedstuffs such as meat and bone meal and fish meal were favored as protein sources, not only for the protein they provided but also because they were rich sources of vitamins and minerals. The onset of World War II caused an increased demand for meat production, but the supply of imported meat proteins was limited. This focused attention on soybean meal as a potential protein supplement. Development of processes to toast the soybean meal to denature trypsin inhibitors, along with development of systems to produce vitamins by chemical synthesis and fermentation, allowed for the rapid increase in the demand for soybean meal. The final factor that allowed for greater use of soybean meal was the discovery of vitamin B12 in 1948. This ended the necessity for the inclusion of animal protein sources in feeds for monogastrics animals.

## Soybean Meal and the Integrated Broiler Industry

The development of the integrated system of poultry production began in the 1950s when progressive individuals set up systems where they controlled the production of

poultry from hatchery, feed manufacturing and processing. As poultry entrepreneurs established their own feed mills, they had no ties to the use of milling byproducts and sought the least expensive and most reliable sources of protein. The development of the linear programming system of feed formulation in the mid 1960s gave further impetus to increased use of soybean meal. As nutritionists began to use the computer to formulate feeds, they quickly found that simple diets based on corn, soybean meal, a methionine supplement, vitamins and minerals were not only effective but also the least-cost way to produce chickens. The rapid rise in poultry consumption (Table 2) has created an even greater demand for soybean meal, both in the United States and in other developing countries.

## Soybean Meal Usage by the Poultry Industry

The poultry industry, including broilers, turkeys and laying hens, is the major user of soybean meal in the United States. Broilers and turkeys consume about 44 percent of all the soybeans used by livestock in the United States, with layers consuming an additional 7 percent, for a total of 51 percent (Table 3). Soybean meal is by far the dominant plant protein produced in the United States (Table 4). Few of the other plant proteins such as cottonseed meal or sunflower meal are used by the poultry industry. It is estimated that more than 98 percent of the plant protein used in poultry feeds

is from soybean meal, with more than 66 percent of all the protein in poultry diets provided from soybean meal. Broilers have a high demand for crude protein and amino acids (Table 5), and thus need a protein source high in amino acids. Results from a recent industry survey indicate that typical amounts of soybean meal added are 29.4 percent in starter feeds, 23.8 percent in grower feeds and 17.8 percent in finisher diets.

## **Declining Usage of Meat Byproducts in Poultry Feed**

Because of consumer concerns about the health and safety of animals fed rendered meat byproducts, coupled with the desire to reduce excessive phosphorus in poultry excreta, the amount of supplemental meat products in poultry feeds has dropped rapidly in the last two years. A recent agricultural survey indicated that animal proteins were added at less than 3 percent in poultry feeds, compared with about 5 percent in previous years. This will place further demands upon soybean meal as a protein source for poultry.

## **Proper Processing Necessary**

Soybeans must be heat-processed to denature the various protease inhibitors, the chief of which are the trypsin inhibitors. Both over-processing, which ties up essential amino acids (especially Lysine), and under-processing are considered detrimental to the effective usage of soybean meal. The urease test, which measures the rise in pH when soybean meal



is placed in a solution containing urea, is the most widely used method to monitor proper toasting of soybean meal for animal feed. Although there is no official urease level specified for poultry, the general recommendation is that the urease be less than 0.20 pH rise; however, recent studies have shown that as much as 0.50 pH rise is acceptable. Because the urease test does not detect over-processing, it is desirable to have some residual urease activity (0.01 to 0.05 units). Over-processing is best determined by measuring protein solubility in a KOH solution. It is suggested that KOH solubility in excess of 85 percent or less than 70 percent indicates under- or over-processing of the meal. However, studies are not consistent in this respect. Particle size of the meal plays a great role in the consistency of responses to the KOH solubility test.

## **Improving Nutritive Value Through Plant Breeding**

As in many crops, the primary focus of plant breeders has been on increased yield or better resistance

to disease. However, more attention is being focused today on improving nutritive value. Most of the focus has been on improving the methionine content, reducing the phytate-bound phosphorus, and reducing the oligosaccharide content.

Although the deficiency of methionine is often mentioned as a detriment to the use of soybean meal in poultry feeds, it is readily and economically produced by chemical synthesis, using toxic byproducts of the chemical industry to produce a desirable and economical feed supplement. Although plant breeders have expressed a desire to increase the methionine content of soybeans, it is not a high priority due to the economy of providing methionine in supplemental form.

Much of the phosphorus in soybeans is present in a complex, with phytic acid rendering the phosphorus in a poorly digested form for monogastrics animals. Phosphorus is one of the most expensive nutrients in a poultry diet, and livestock producers everywhere are becoming more concerned about the effects of phosphorus in the