

LAYING HENS

Current situation

A large percentage of laying hens in the EU member states are still housed in conventional battery cages, even though this method of production will no longer be permitted after 2012. In 2007 a total of 389 million laying hens were kept in the EU-25, of which about 68.6% were in battery cages³⁴. These cages are made of thin wire mesh, including the floors, which slope to allow the eggs to roll out for collection. One building may contain tens of thousands of birds stacked in cages six tiers high, with a walkway above the third tier to facilitate inspection.

Non-cage systems for the keeping of laying hens include barn systems (or percheries) and free-range. In barn systems, the birds are reared indoors, but do have access to perches to roost on, litter in which to scratch and dustbathe, and nest boxes in which to perform nesting behaviours and lay eggs. Free-range housing is very similar to the barn system, but the hens also have continuous daytime access to an open-air range area covered in vegetation. In 1996 free-range hens represented 2.43% of the total laying hens raised in the EU-15 and by 2007 it had reached 16.9% in the EU-25³⁵.

The conventional battery cage system provides a barren environment for hens. Research indicates that hens require a nest in which to lay their eggs, a perch, material in which to dust bathe and scratch, and sufficient room to flap their wings and move around without the risk of attack from other birds. Welfare and health problems arising from the keeping of hens in battery cages include stereotyped behaviour, poor feather cover and bone weakness caused by the inability to move normally. Bone fragility is a major problem. Up to 30% of caged hens may have broken bones by the time they are slaughtered. Many birds in battery cages also have ulcerated feet and long claws which can get caught and torn off in the wire mesh cage floors.

A further welfare concern, which is associated with both the battery cage system and some alternative systems, is feather pecking. Beak trimming is often carried out as a matter of routine in order to minimise the risk of injury from feather pecking and to prevent cannibalism. Hot-blade trimming, a common method of beak trimming, is known to cause pain which can persist after the procedure, particularly when older birds are beak trimmed, and should be phased out. Other methods, such as infra-red treatment, appear to offer a higher welfare alternative. The procedure is deemed necessary in order to prevent major welfare problems which can occur in the event of a feather pecking outbreak. The reasons for feather pecking are complex, but there is evidence that it differs between strains of hen, in addition to the influence of environmental factors.

A study commissioned by Eurogroup in 1998 looked at public attitudes in France, UK, Spain, Italy and Germany on egg purchasing and labelling. The results showed that the public was prepared to pay more for free-range eggs, but that they were confused by the way eggs are labelled and the relationship between the labelling and the way eggs are produced. This led to the European Commission adopting compulsory rules in 2002 to label eggs and egg boxes according to the method of production.

³⁴/Source: DG Agriculture

³⁵/Source: DG Agriculture

There has been an increasing demand for eggs from alternative systems, stimulated partly by clearer labelling under the new marketing regulation but also by a positive change in policy made by some supermarkets, particularly in northern Europe.

Legislation

Council of Europe

The Standing Committee of the *European Convention for the Protection of Animals kept for Farming Purposes* adopted in 1995 a revised *Recommendation concerning Domestic Fowl (Gallus gallus)*. This replaced an earlier version from 1986. The recommendation lays down basic principles for the welfare of laying hens under all types of production system. Its provisions encourage a move away from the cramped and barren environment of the conventional battery cage, and the development of alternative housing systems and strains of hen which will obviate the need for beak trimming. The Recommendation was due for review again in 2001 but discussions have not started yet.

European Union

The welfare of all laying hens is provided for under *Council Directive 1999/74/EC of 19 July 1999*. This replaced the 1988 directive which only covered hens kept in battery cages.

The Directive bans all conventional cages from 1 January 2012 and since 1 January 2002, a maximum of nine hens per m² (rather than 12 per m²) are permitted in all new alternative housing systems and from 1st January 2012 in all alternative systems.

After 2012, only enriched cages can be used. In this system hens must have access to a nest, perches, and some form of scratching material. Usable space per bird must be at least 600cm² and when combined with the nesting reach 750cm² per bird. This system has been strongly criticised, not least because the space is still too restrictive and it can be difficult due to both space and design for all hens to use the facilities appropriately.

The Commission in January 2008 published a review³⁶ based on an opinion of the Scientific Panel on Animal Health and Welfare related to the welfare aspects of various systems of keeping laying hens³⁷. It states that the 2012 ban on conventional cages should be maintained.

Commission Regulation (EC) No 589/2008 of 23 June 2008 laying down detailed rules for implementing Council Regulation (EC) No 1234/2007 as regards marketing standards for eggs requires table eggs to be labelled according to the method of production. However it does not apply to eggs imported from third countries.

Since 1 January 2004, eggs and packs must be identified with one of the following four categories designating the methods of farming:

- on packs: “organic”, “free-range”, “barn” or “eggs from caged hens”
- on eggs: organic, free-range, barn or cage; this can be replaced with a number as long as the code is explained on the pack.

National legislation

Most member states correctly transposed Council Directive 1999/74/EC. By the end of 2008 producers had made very little progress in introducing enriched cages or shifting toward alternative systems. Major retailers in several member states have decided to stop selling eggs from caged hens, including from enriched cages, developing marketing strategies for eggs produced in alternative systems.

³⁶/COM(2007)865 – Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament and the Council on the various systems of rearing laying hens in particular those covered by Directive 1999/74/EC

³⁷/Available at : http://www.efsa.europa.eu/EFSA/efsa_locale-1178620753812_1178620775132.htm

The Food and Veterinary Office published in 2005 a report about a series of missions concerning laying hen farms carried out during 2004. These missions provided evidence that in some member states there were still difficulties with the implementation of the directive. Each of the member states concerned has subsequently provided the Commission with an action plan on how they intend to address these issues in the future. The Commission services could take further follow-up action where areas of non-compliance continue to be addressed in an unsatisfactory manner.

Most of the member states did not introduce any stricter provision than the EU directive, except for Austria, where all cages for laying hens are banned since January 1, 2009, under the 2005 animal welfare law. Exemptions are only granted until 2020 for farms already equipped with enriched cages at the time the ban was adopted, by the end of 2004. In Germany all traditional and enriched cages are banned since 2009, but cages of the so-called kleingruppenhaltung (small group cages) type are still allowed. These cages are 50-60 cm high and provide for an area of 800 cm² per hen.

In Luxembourg, egg production is mostly shared between organic and free range/barn systems. In Belgium an opinion of the animal welfare commission advises the government to ban all types of cages by 2025. This amendment to the Belgian law is expected to be published during 2010.

Future action

- Compulsory labelling to indicate the production system for all imported eggs should be introduced. This would reduce the risk that lower welfare imported eggs compete with eggs produced under EU welfare standards.
- Financial incentives to encourage cage egg producers to move to alternative systems should be introduced by both the national governments through their rural development programmes.
- Further research should be supported to improve alternative housing systems and the general welfare of hens.