

SUBMISSION TO ANIMAL HEALTH AUSTRALIA

19 February 2018

Dear Animal Health Australia

RE: SUBMISSION – ANIMAL WELFARE STANDARDS PUBLIC CONSULTATION

There's a lot of talk by a lot of people about what they *think* we do and what they think we should do.

I'd like to share with you what we *actually* do and why.

My name is Giorgina Abraham and I'm a 2nd generation egg farmer from Devon Meadows Victoria. We've been farming eggs for 45 *years*.

We have 42000 hens and farm *free range* eggs. We produce about 36000 eggs a day or 1 900 000 eggs per annum.

Animal welfare matters to me

Animal welfare is very important to me. I care about my hens and I recognise and accept my responsibility to look after their health and welfare and adopt best practice to do so. Farming is hard enough; if I didn't love my animals I wouldn't do it. That's why it's particularly difficult to hear activists and other uninformed people talk about us and what we do like we're cruel, heartless people. We're not irrespective of what egg production system we operate.

As well as valuing the hens as living creatures, their health and welfare are important for economic reasons - healthy hens lay healthy eggs. A safe environment, good feed, plenty of water and strict biosecurity measures are some of the ways we ensure the health and welfare of our hens and sustainable productivity.

We chose to farm free range for a number of reasons but we were caged producers prior to 1999, and irrespective of our production system all egg producers prioritise animal health and welfare outcomes. Of the three production methods however cage hens:

- have the lowest mortality rate
- have the lowest incidence of disease
- have the lowest rate of cannibalism
- require fewer vaccinations
- enjoy a climate-controlled environment year-round
- are not at risk of predation
- lay clean eggs.

Cage farming systems offer the most predictable supply of eggs, have the lowest carbon footprint and don't require vast tracts of land which are hard to find and subject to significant zoning, environmental and land use requirements and red tape.

Finally, customers like caged eggs because they are readily available and affordable. They want cage eggs too. Yes, demand for free range eggs may be increasing but there is still a significant demand for cage eggs and like any business we give the customers what they want.

Don't stop cage egg production

I'm well aware of the calls from the activists and even an Agriculture Minister to 'ban' cages. For me, there are five main reasons why this should not happen:

1. The hens are well looked after.
2. Customer choice – why shouldn't the public be able to buy the eggs they want? If they want cage eggs – and they do – they should be given that choice
3. Cost of living – cage eggs are the most affordable. Seventy per cent of all cage eggs are bought by people who earn less than the average Australian income, so why shouldn't they be able to feed their families with affordable, protein-rich and healthy eggs?
4. Investment to date – industry has invested almost \$500 million in the last 10 years to improve significantly the cage systems.
5. Business survival – banning cages will impose great strain on our existing free range egg business as we too have also invested in the free range industry over the last 10 years.
6. This will bring us to the wall as we produce a lot less in terms of quantity and our cost of production is significantly more. Finally, our niche market of free range will be lost. We are already faced with extra costs of maintaining a lot more land to comply with the outdoor stocking density legislation and then we too will never recover our investment. You simply cannot stop cage egg producers and make them start again with a different production system after they have already invested millions in highly effective and compliant caged production systems. If you keep moving the goal posts Australia is such a rich producing country but in the end you will be importing diseased and infected eggs from overseas because Australia will not be able to produce the quantity to meet the demand for eggs using alternative systemsit just isn't possible to feed a nation with free range and barn laid eggs...

We support the Standards and Guidelines

As an industry we have shown that we are responsive to customer needs and changes in practice to achieve better animal welfare outcomes.

I think the Standards and Guidelines will help us continue to improve and help 'weed out' any rogue operators that don't do the right thing and tarnish the image of our industry.

As such, I support Option C.

One thing that has become clear to me over the last few months during this process is that the misconceptions and misperceptions about the egg farming industry are persisting. And that's largely in part because of the vocal activist groups. I'm certain that thousands of people will sign online forms or standard submissions calling for a ban on cages, influenced by emotive language and decades-old photos and film of cage systems that are no longer used or even longer exist. But I'm also certain that less than five per cent will have been to an egg farm and seen what it's *really* like. I believe that if they did there would be a far more balanced view.

I know that our industry has not done enough to tell our story and we need to do something about it. I think implementation of Option C of the Standards and Guidelines gives us an excellent opportunity to do more to educate the egg eating consumers about egg farming so they can feel OK about buying eggs from whichever production system they choose.