

## **Submission in relation to the Proposed Draft Australian Animal Welfare Standards and Guidelines for Poultry (November 2017)**

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### **Introduction**

Rather than responding to the RIS questions I have chosen to put in my own submission. It begins with some general observations and then relates more specifically to layer hens.

The following abbreviations are used in my submission:

**Victorian Science Review** refers to the Farmed Bird Welfare Science Review carried out by Agriculture Victoria in October 2017 ([www.agriculture.vic.gov.au](http://www.agriculture.vic.gov.au));

**Model Code** refers to the Model Code of Practice for the Welfare of Animals: Domestic Poultry – 4<sup>th</sup> edition (2002) (<http://www.publish.csiro.au/ebook/download/pdf/3451>);

**proposed standards** refers to the public consultation version of the Proposed Draft Australian Animal Welfare Standards and Guidelines for Poultry (November 2017).

### **1. The process of developing the proposed standards**

The opening statement in the Preface to the proposed standards is this:

“The development of Australian Animal Welfare Standards and Guidelines for Poultry is an important initiative of all Australian Governments to guide new, nationally consistent policies to *enhance animal welfare arrangements* in all Australian states and territories. The development process is *supported and funded by all Governments and the major poultry industries*” (my italics).

There goes any pretence at independence, in the first few lines. The person who pays the piper calls the tune, and accepting funding for drafting the standards from the major poultry industries guarantees bias in favour of commercial profits over animal welfare.

The same goes for governments, since throughout Australia the portfolio of animal welfare resides within either a department of agriculture or of primary industry - a classic conflict of interest.

Without an independent regulator, if there is a clash between the commercial imperatives of farming (such as profits and efficiencies in production) and the humane

management of farm animals as sentient beings capable of suffering and of feeling pain, fear and distress, the former will prevail.

There have been a number of damning reports about the process of developing the proposed standards, including an ABC 7.30 Report in December 2017 and a number of newspaper articles. The concerns expressed include the following:

- that inadequate research was undertaken to back the proposals, and that the use of that research was misleading and/or selective. Perhaps because of this the Victorian government commissioned its own independent research that resulted in the recently published Victorian Science Review\*. The RSPCA did the same.
- that the “process lacked independence and transparency and had been ‘stage managed’ for the benefit of industry”<sup>1</sup>.
- that the proposed standards fail to reflect community expectations about animal welfare. Perhaps the most egregious example of this is in relation to caged production systems for laying hens (see 3 below).

\*The Victorian Science Review is a review of the peer-reviewed scientific literature on the care, management and slaughter of farmed poultry and game birds. A useful comparison of the various production systems for domestic poultry and an assessment of other common practices such as beak trimming and induced moulting is attached as Appendix A to this submission.

## **2. Is there any point in participating in the Consultation process?**

In the recent Treasury consultation into determining a national standard for free range eggs, over 84% of the written submissions supported the retention of the Model Code’s free range outdoor stocking density recommendation of 1,500 hens/ha. Prior to the consultation the major egg industry bodies had been pushing for 10,000 hens per hectare, and Coles and Woolworths had adopted this as their free range standard. It therefore came as little surprise that this 6-fold increase on the CSIRO’s scientifically based welfare recommendation was duly endorsed. It has since been published and is about to come into effect.

The Treasury consultation process paid lip service to, but had no actual regard for, consumer expectations or animal welfare. It was not a genuine attempt to gauge public opinion in good faith on a matter of public interest and factor the result of that consultation into the outcome of the process.

Given this recent precedent and the fact that the process of developing the proposed standards has already been called into question, it is not unreasonable to ask whether this consultation process is genuine or merely a box ticking exercise. I hope that I and others like me who have put aside their cynicism to participate in the consultation will have their concerns seriously considered.

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<sup>1</sup> The Conversation: *Governments can’t be trusted to deliver welfare standards for chickens* (26 February 2018) <https://theconversation.com/governments-cant-be-trusted-to-deliver-welfare-standards-for-chickens-90091>

3. **Caged Hens:** On the issue of caged hens Australia lags way behind Switzerland, which phased them out 20 years ago, and the EU, which banned battery cages from 2012. Canada and New Zealand are in the process of doing the same, as are a number of states in the USA, supported by several major retailers that have committed to cage-free eggs<sup>2</sup>. It will be interesting to see if the supermarkets in Australia follow suit, to fulfil the expectations of consumers and to fill the policy gap left by government.

To some extent this is already happening. Over the past decade the “proportion of caged eggs sold in supermarkets has fallen from 75% to 49%”<sup>3</sup> and over 110,000 people so far have signed the Animals Australia petition against battery cages. Nevertheless approximately 63% of layer hens still spend their lives in battery cages.

Why are alternatives to this inhumane system of egg production not even considered in the proposed standards? Is it because the authors of the standards have concluded that they provide an acceptable level of animal welfare, notwithstanding all the evidence to the contrary?<sup>4</sup> If this is so, one can only gasp at the cynicism of the “Principles” underlying the standards (page 12) which state (inter alia):

“Adherence to good animal husbandry principles is essential to meet the welfare requirements of animals. Good husbandry principles that also meet the basic physiological and behavioural needs of poultry include ... space to stand, lie and stretch their wings and limbs and perform normal patterns of behaviour.”

Normal patterns of behaviour include preening, wing stretching, nesting, foraging, perching and dust bathing, none of which are possible within the space allocations (about equivalent to one A4 sized piece of paper per hen) of the proposed standards for conventional cages (or for that matter non-cage systems). The Victorian Science Review notes that “Behaviour in conventional cages is severely constrained with evidence of negative effects on welfare” (page 45). For a summary of the welfare considerations of the different production systems please see Appendix A.

To persist in the production of eggs from caged hens is to fail four out of five of the five freedoms: freedom from pain, injury and disease, freedom from fear and distress, freedom from discomfort, and freedom to express normal behaviour. Much of the civilised Western World has phased out, or is in the process of phasing out, conventional cages, and Australia is not even considering the possibility of doing so. This is a national shame.

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<sup>2</sup> The Conversation: *Proposed poultry standards leave Australia trailing behind other industrialised countries* (1 December 2017) <https://theconversation.com/proposed-poultry-standards-leave-australia-trailing-behind-other-industrialised-countries-88302>

<sup>3</sup> The Conversation 26 February 2018 (see above)

<sup>4</sup> See Appendix A and the list of references of scientific research considered for the Victorian Science Review.

#### 4. Do the proposed standards improve animal welfare for hens?

Clearly in relation to the failure to phase out conventional cages the answer to this question is “no”. But what about more generally?

Section 3.1 of the Model Code (published 16 years ago) “recommends that the maximum acceptable true weight densities be reviewed and adjusted according to advances in knowledge of animal welfare and husbandry”.

One would assume that, sixteen years on, these “*advances in knowledge*” would mean that animal welfare would improve, and indeed the proposed standards contemplate this. On page 12 of the proposed standards under the heading **Principles**, reference is made to the “improved welfare outcomes envisaged by the standards”. Although the proposed standards are intended to replace the Model Code, they have in fact adopted their restrictive space allowances for cage and non-cage systems – with the exception of the free range recommendation where the permissible outdoor stocking rate has been increased over 6-fold (see above). Under the proposed standards animal welfare for domestic poultry is remaining static or being eroded.

#### 5. How could the proposed standards be amended to improve animal welfare outcomes?

**Distinction between standards and guidelines is strained:** The proposed standards include standards and guidelines. The standards (unlike the recommendations of the Model Code) are intended to be legally binding; the guidelines are not: they are merely intended “to be *considered* by industry for incorporation into national industry QA along with the standards”. The sub-text of this statement is clearly “don’t bother too much about the guidelines”. Unfortunately it is the guidelines that contain the principal protections of animal welfare.

In most cases there is no apparent or logical rationale for the distinction. For example, in relation to the management of outdoor (free range) systems (Part 5), all the guidelines should be mandatory.

**Free range systems: factors should be based on up to date research and some relevant factors have been omitted:** For free range systems other relevant factors need to be included based on up to date research. For instance the size of the outdoor range becomes irrelevant if the hens never go outside because of factors such as flock size, shed size, the number of popholes and the number of birds per metre of pophole. The latter two are covered in the proposed standards but have just been taken unaltered from the Model Code – has any recent research or significant recent judicial finding been considered?

Flock size and shed size are important factors that do not appear to have been included at all. In the case of ACCC v Snowdale Holdings the expert witness for the ACCC gave evidence that

“flock size significantly affected the ability and propensity of the hens to exit a shed”<sup>5</sup>. He said that “in barns with thousands of laying hens, the hens would have to move past unfamiliar hens and would find that behaviour ‘aversive’”. He also referred at length to the other factors and the state of the outdoor range. He was found by the Judge to be an “impressive” witness and his evidence was accepted without qualification.

**Inconsistencies eg beak trimming:** There are some internal inconsistencies. For example, GA9.15 states that “Alternative strategies for managing injurious (feather) pecking *that minimise the need for beak trimming* should be employed”. However GA3.17 states that “feather pecking and cannibalism risk should be managed. Management methods, such as [infrared beak trim at day old] may be considered”. Using the “pre-emptive” beak trim precludes any consideration later on of alternative, less painful, stressful and invasive strategies that do not inhibit natural behaviours such as preening. Moreover, if this cruel practice is to be undertaken at all it should be mandatory (not just a guideline) that beak trimming be “carried out by trained and skilled personnel at as early an age as possible and care should be taken to remove the minimum amount of beak necessary using a method which minimises pain and controls bleeding”, and hot blade beak trimming should be explicitly banned.

**Forced moulting:** The way in which the issue of forced moulting is addressed in the proposed standards is unsatisfactory. “The practice of moulting hens by removal or restriction of feed causes severe welfare problems of bird hunger, stress and unacceptable levels of mortality. These problems are not reduced or mitigated by feeding low-nutrient diets”<sup>6</sup>.

**Killing of male chicks:** The mass killing of male chicks by gassing or maceration should be addressed in the proposed standards in light of the new technologies available to determine the sex of the chick before hatching.

**In conclusion:** In this submission I have set out some of the ways in which the proposed standards fail to fulfil their stated objective to enhance animal welfare arrangements in Australia. The most extreme of these is the failure to begin the long overdue process of eliminating battery cages, in which every day, year after year, millions of hens live out their lives in abject misery.

Thank you for reading my submission.

Dinny Laurence

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<sup>5</sup> Judgment in ACCC v Snowdale Holdings, para 314 et seq.

<sup>6</sup> The Victorian Science Review deals at length with forced moulting. The quotation is from the Welfare Overview on page 59.

## **Appendix A – extract from Farm Bird Welfare Science Review Oct 2017 pp 58 and 59**

### **Welfare Considerations: Overview**

Laying hens are housed in a wider range of housing systems than other species of farmed poultry and, for this reason, housing system itself is a major influence on bird welfare.

The conventional cage (CC) system prevents birds from performing basic movements essential for good health (walking, wing stretching), and denies birds the possibility of expressing their behavioural needs to roost, nest and forage, or their motivation to dust-bathe, due to an inherent lack of resources. Lack of exercise weakens bones which are likely to fracture during depopulation, and leads to metabolic conditions such as haemorrhagic fatty liver syndrome. Claw breakage, plumage abrasion and poor foot health are also features of CC systems. The general benefits of cage systems (such as reduced contact with faecal material, parasite load, infectious disease and relatively low mortality) are largely equalled or surpassed in furnished (enriched or colony) systems (FC). Immune function appears to be suppressed in hens housed in conventional cages compared with hens in FC systems, and levels of aggression are higher in CC systems. The welfare problems associated with CCs are substantial and their benefits can be achieved in other cage systems.

The FC system permits laying hens to perform a broader range of behaviours than the CC. Comfort movements, nesting and roosting can all take place at a rudimentary level although it is likely that behavioural needs are not fully satisfied in this system. Hens in FCs are not able to fly and foraging and dust-bathing opportunities are limited. Mortality in modern furnished cages is lower than in any other system. Birds in FCs have stronger bones than birds in conventional cages, a lower prevalence of injury during depopulation than hens from CCs, and a lower incidence of keel bone fractures during the laying period than hens from non-cage (NC) systems. The welfare problems associated with FCs are significant but these could potentially be reduced by lower stocking rates and improved provision of foraging and dust-bathing areas. A spatial allowance of at least 750 cm<sup>2</sup>/bird is required to ensure bird welfare. The health of birds in FCs is, on average, higher than that of hens from NC systems where far greater variation occurs.

NC systems tend to have highly variable outcomes for flock mortality, health, prevalence of keel fractures and injurious pecking. These systems are difficult to manage well and require attentive and experienced staff and managers. Monitoring levels of mortality, keel fractures and plumage scores in NC systems would enable targets to be set for progressive improvement. Recording broad causes of mortality (e.g. culls, predation, smothering) would facilitate progress. Attention to biosecurity, the use of ramps to access different levels within a house, careful positioning of house furniture, and the use of published management strategies to reduce feather pecking would be expected to lead to gradual

reductions in these welfare problems. In NC systems, wire mesh floors have health advantages compared with plastic floors. These same considerations apply to free-range (FR) systems, although good use of the range can mitigate some of the problems encountered in indoor NC systems. Range use should be encouraged by the use of shrubs, trees and shelters.

The effects of stocking density for hens in NC systems have not been fully researched. Ensuring that resources are sufficient and are evenly distributed is important to avoid locally high stocking densities.

Low light intensity is sometimes used in an attempt to control inter-bird pecking but this can have adverse effects on eye function. It can be counter-productive if other foraging substrates appear less attractive than feathers.

Rearing pullets with appropriate enrichment discourages the development of feather pecking and helps to ensure that birds will be able to make full use of all facilities in the laying house as adults.

Infra-red beak trimming may be a necessary interim method of reducing the damage associated with inter-bird pecking, particularly during any industry transition towards NC systems. However, beak trimming has associated welfare problems. With advances in genetic selection and improved management, the prevalence of feather pecking would be expected to reduce. It may be possible to phase out the practice of beak trimming under these conditions.

Steps must be taken in all housing systems to control populations of red mite which can cause serious welfare problems for laying hens. Further research on methods of mite control is urgently required given growing resistance to current acaricides.

The practice of moulting hens by removal or restriction of feed causes severe welfare problems of bird hunger, stress and unacceptable levels of mortality. These problems are not reduced or mitigated by feeding low-nutrient diets. Modern strains of laying hen are now available with increased durations of the first laying cycle (90 weeks or more) greatly reducing any perceived need to moult. Reduced egg production towards the end of the first laying cycle can occur due to fat deposition and lack of exercise, but this is primarily a problem associated with CC systems. There are no welfare benefits that could outweigh the welfare costs of this practice.