

Submission to the draft Australian Animal Welfare Standards and Guidelines for Poultry

Submission is made by Kevin McLeod - retired poultry farmer.

My main interest and concern is the question of whether hens should continue to be kept in cages as a means of producing eggs.

Much is made of various trials run to discover poultry preferences as to the type of housing the birds innately prefer. These trials are highly suspect. I refer to the story produced by the BBC of Great Britain where much of the anti-cage rhetoric arises and seeks to be backed up by suitable science based trials.

<http://www.bbc.com/news/science-environment-39054778>

Recent work by scientists shows that two thirds of the results of scientific papers particularly as it related to animal trials cannot be reproduced when redone by other scientists. One must then decide which section does the information fall into – the suspect two thirds or the results that are reproducible. The correct course to take would be to only accept those results which have been independently reproduced by a disinterested third party. For this reason most of the references quoted by the RSPCA would need to be discounted.

I believe my opinion and farmers of a similar nature which is based on many years firsthand experience handling poultry on a daily basis should rank equal to scientists whose results in two thirds of their work can't be reproduced by other scientists.

I'll confine my arguments to the reasons I think hens should be allowed to be confined in houses (commonly called cages) within a climate controlled shed and then a list of the disadvantages of production using hens as free range or barn.

Hens in houses or cages within a shed are restricted in the amount of area they can move around in. Hens move around because they are looking for food or shelter. When food is available without effort 24 hours a day the need and the desire to run around is mostly removed. My experience was that when a hen accidentally found its way out of the cage if the door was left open it would often get back in unless it could find food and water elsewhere.

Hens weren't interested in leaving their fellow hens. They didn't head into the bush to become "free range". In spite of 200 years of colonization no feral populations of free range hens exist in mainland Australia.

Farmers are concerned about profit, the welfare of their animals and remaining viable. The short term super profits that have been available to free range operators thanks to free advertising provided by the RSPCA and others has distorted the market, pulling many into operating "free range" and some unfortunately into breaking the law in describing their egg production methods.

The "super profit" cycle has ended with a crash so this Pull mechanism is ended. Now is a good time to examine the pros and cons of the various production methods without the distortion of the profit motive.

Taking a long term view the climate is in the process of getting warmer on average. This means the number of days outside the survivable temperature range for hens is increasing and the temperature reading for the hottest day of the year is also increasing. Temperatures that can cause wild birds to drop out of the sky will not be abnormal. Hens kept in houses can be cooled effectively and back up electrical generators will be available to ensure hen welfare. Hens in individual houses or cages are evenly spread throughout the building making cooling easier and more effective.

While the climate is getting hotter it is also subject to extremes of rainfall with recent incidences of flooding affecting free range operations. Free range farms are often located on flood plains due to the presence of good soil and water.

Housed Hens lay more eggs on average – there are no scientific arguments on that statistic. They do so because stress and competition has been removed.

Hen Housed Egg Production must be related to hen welfare and to argue otherwise defies logic.

Each individual hen can be easily checked daily. The amount of food eaten in a 24 hour period can be measured particularly in larger operations where individual costs per hen housed are lower. This allows a quick response to any drop which is often a sign of disease, stress or water restriction. Alarms can be installed to further help hen welfare.

Very importantly manure can be collected efficiently and used to help power the farm in a carbon friendly manner or used to create organic fertilizer. This is important as phosphorous becomes more expensive with “peak phosphorus” being predicted around the world as we use up available known reserves. In addition Nitrogen is a pollutant of waterways, aquifers and water supplies especially in country areas and of course a stress factor in the Great Barrier Reef die off.

Many diseases are prevented by the use of cages which breaks the oral - faecal cycle and no doubt much will be made of this by others more qualified than myself. Suffice to say that without breaking that cycle the level of husbandry required to keep the hens healthy and producing is much higher with very little room for error.

The nature of hens is to socialize in small groups of a cockerel and a few hens. Thus the cage system more closely resembles their natural situation. A pecking order is easily and quickly established and they get on with the business of producing eggs in a stress free environment. Without the cockerel present there is even less stress on the hens.

Much is made of the “five freedoms” while little is made of the sixth freedom.

Freedom from anthropomorphism!

Anthropomorphism as it relates to hens reached its peak in Australia in the form of a television campaign where a television personality spoke lovingly about his “lady” sitting on the arm rest of his lounge chair - The lady being a rather nonplussed looking laying hen. This is an example of the unrealistic and emotive picture put out by those putting the case for hens to be only managed as “free range” Was the viewer expected to buy eggs from hens kept in the lounge room – the next step in the humanization of the chicken species.

It's important that decisions on hen welfare not be based on humanizing the *gallus gallus domesticus* species and policy makers be prepared to "cop the flake" from the emotional fringe using arguments based on the reality of the hens true welfare as a "working" animal free from pain and stress.

Examples of well intentioned policy changes that resulted in more grief than they sought to alleviate are the policy to ban live cattle exports rather than fix the problems and the close down of the grey hound industry due to some players bad actions.

What are the disadvantages of banning cage egg production?

Banning would remove a major source of possible innovation that allows the full expression of genetic improvements being presently bred into the species.

Caged or housed egg production is but one method of egg production in a suite of methods. This variety of methods provides some resilience to the production model. When one system is under challenge such as a virulent strain of Avian flu being actively spread by wild birds then the housed population would provide egg production to keep the industry viable and take the pressure off requests for imported eggs.

Banning caged egg production would mean egg production would gravitate to areas of mild climate increasing transport costs and concentrating production in these areas.

Costs would be higher overall due to land requirements, higher labour needs and greater feed and cost of mortalities.

Most cases of Salmonella poisoning arise from free range farms due to the difficulty of keeping eggs clean.

Disease from contact with wild birds is more likely.

The chance of high mortality due to predators with subsequent stress to the remaining hens is a factor.

Chickens are mono gastric and have no digestive facilities to get their protein and energy from grass. Hens naturally peck and when grass is on offer they ingest it resulting in gizzards packed with grass resulting in death. They normally eat high protein insects and seeds when in productive lay.

Sheds which open to fields can't be proofed against rats and mice so continuous poisoning has to be done resulting in the local populations of owls and raptors also being poisoned and becoming locally extinct.

Thanking you for the opportunity to express my opinion on this vital subject.

Regards

Kevin McLeod

Retired cage egg farmer