

Choose wisely egg campaign - FAQs

What do the different terms, cage, barn and free-range mean?

Cage eggs

Cage eggs come from hens in battery cages. A battery cage is made entirely of welded wire and will usually house 3-5 birds. The floor of the cage slopes down to the front so that the eggs roll away out of the cage. The hens have access to food troughs and water drinkers through the front of the cage.

In newer systems, cages are stacked in several tiers, one above the other, inside a climate-controlled shed. The shed may contain as many as 30,000 birds. Older systems have cages in a single tier in sheds with natural ventilation. Modern sheds have automated egg and manure collection systems; in older sheds this is carried out manually.

The current minimum space allocation for caged birds (under 2.4kg) is 450cm² floor space (less than of the size of a piece of A4 paper) and 40cm high. Regulations are being introduced to slightly increase the minimum floor space to 550cm² (still less than the size of a piece of A4 paper). The small size of cages means that birds are unable to turn around easily, stretch out or flap their wings, or exercise.

Barn eggs

Barn eggs come from hens housed in a large barn or shed, which contains perches, litter, nest boxes, feeders and drinkers. Most barns have around one-third of the floor space covered with litter which allows for scratching and dust-bathing. Flocks may be small (500 birds) or large (5000 birds). RSPCA-accredited barn-housed hens are kept at a low stocking density of 7 birds/m², but non-accredited barns may stock as many as 12 birds/ m².

Barn-housed hens have the freedom to move around, stretch, flap their wings, socialise, perch and dust bathe. They are also able to lay their eggs in an enclosed nest, a behavioural priority for all hens.

Free-range eggs

Free-range eggs come from hens that have access to an outdoor area during the day. At night, large flocks of free-range hens are kept in sheds or barns which have similar features to those for barn-housed hens. Smaller flocks may be housed in moveable sheds to allow rotational use of the range area.

What are the problems with battery cages?

The scientific evidence indicates that battery hens suffer intensely and continuously throughout their confinement in cages. The restricted movement, lack of exercise in battery cages, constant exposure to a wire floor and lack of perches lead to serious bone and muscle weakness.

The problems with cages are locked into the system itself: cages do not allow birds enough space to exercise, or to carry out behaviours such as wing flapping, flying, dust bathing, perching and foraging. Caged hens also lack the opportunity to maintain a normal 'personal space' and to escape from bullying. But the most serious deficiency is the lack of a suitable nesting area. Nesting before and during egg laying is a priority for layer hens and the lack of a suitable nesting place leaves hens severely frustrated.

A recent detailed report from the LayWel project in Europe, which involves the collaboration of all the major layer hen welfare researchers in the EU, puts the case against battery cages very clearly:

“Conventional cages do not allow hens to fulfil behaviour priorities, preferences and needs for nesting, perching, foraging and dustbathing in particular. We believe these disadvantages outweigh the advantages of reduced parasitism, good hygiene and simpler management. The advantages can be matched by other systems that also enable a much fuller expression of normal behaviour.”

What are the advantages of alternative housing systems?

In non-cage systems, such as barn and free-range, hens have the opportunity to express their full range of behaviours. Hens have access to a private, enclosed area for laying, which is a priority for hens. They have the freedom to flap their wings, stretch, fly, dustbathe and forage. Hens can move around and explore their environment. The extra space also allows submissive birds to avoid dominant birds if they need to.

As with any production system, there are some disadvantages with barn and free-range housing, but unlike cages, these problems are not locked into the system. Farmers need to ensure that barn and free-range birds are protected from feather pecking and cannibalism, and that stocking densities are kept low to ensure all hens have access to nest boxes, foraging areas and perches as well as feeding and drinking areas. If these things are taken care of, then the overwhelming evidence is that non-cage systems can provide everything that layer hens need for their welfare.

Good welfare in alternative housing systems relies on setting high standards of bird management and housing design. This is one reason why the RSPCA Australia layer hen accreditation system was introduced to set welfare standards for barn and free-range hens. The RSPCA Australia standards ensure all birds have the opportunity to express their normal behaviours while protecting them from disease, predators and aggressive behaviours.

Aren't there some advantages to battery cages?

There are advantages and disadvantages to every system of housing layer hens. Battery cages were originally designed to improve hygiene and reduce the risk of disease by keeping hens caged in small groups in on a wire floor so they were separated from their faeces. Keeping hens in cages in climate-controlled sheds also allows farmers to closely control the temperature and humidity in the hen's environment to maximise egg production (however most older sheds are not climate controlled).

But this all comes at a great cost. The egg industry argues that the high laying rates in cages indicate healthy, productive hens, but the overwhelming evidence is that the welfare of hens is severely compromised in battery cages.

What difference does the RSPCA accreditation scheme make?

Eggs labelled with the RSPCA logo are produced according to RSPCA accreditation standards. These are much higher standards than are legally required. RSPCA standards ensure that hens are housed in conditions where they have access to a nest in which to lay their eggs, litter in which to dustbathe, space to move around freely, flap their wings, stretch and socialise. They have constant access to food and water and are protected from predators and the elements.

RSPCA standards set minimum stocking densities for birds in barn and free-range systems to avoid overcrowding and protect the welfare of the birds.

RSPCA-accredited farms are inspected every 8-12 weeks by an experienced RSPCA egg inspector to ensure that standards are being met.

How intelligent are chickens anyway?

Chickens are much more intelligent than you might think. For example, because they are social animals, they need to be able to communicate easily with each other. Chickens have over 20 different calls, including two distinct alarm calls to warn their flock about approaching predators. Aerial (flying) predators such as hawks and eagles will cause hens to give a different alarm call than ground predators, and the birds react differently to each call. When hens hear an aerial alarm call they run for cover, crouch down and look upwards; when they hear a ground alarm call they actively look around them for signs of danger. Chickens also use calls to communicate with each other about food. Studies of chickens have indicated that they can interpret the meanings of individual calls and can use calls to show their intention when communicating with each other.

Chickens have a complex nervous system that includes a prodigious memory and the ability to make complex decisions. Researchers who have studied the behaviour of chickens are clear that battery cages can in no way meet the demands of such remarkable animals. Caged chickens have little opportunity for decision making or control over their own lives. They have no access to materials for foraging, dust bathing or nesting. In the absence of these opportunities, chickens are forced to find abnormal ways of coping without them. What the science tells us is that layer hens deserve much better than to be forced to endure their lifetime in a barren battery cage.

Can farmers afford to put alternatives in place?

We already know that alternative systems work because many farmers are already using them. What is needed to increase the move from cage to non-cage eggs is for consumers to avoid buying cage eggs. Farmers and supermarkets will respond to the demands of consumers if the message is loud and clear enough.

Barn and free range eggs can be more expensive and switching from cage production requires a change in management and housing design, but these costs are not extreme. It has been estimated that switching to an alternative system results in an increase in production costs of 10-15%, much less than the current difference in price between cage and most free-range eggs.

What about enriched cages?

Enriched or furnished cages are a new development which originated in Europe. These cages are not yet in commercial use in Australia. They have been designed as a compromise between battery cage and barn systems by providing some of the facilities of a barn inside a cage. Furnished cages are larger than conventional cages, with more birds per cage, and contain a perch and nesting area (some types also include a dust bath).

Research into the welfare of hens in furnished cages is still ongoing, but there seem to be big differences between different types of hens and designs of cages, making it hard to draw firm

conclusions. Whatever the design, what furnished cages can never provide is the freedom of movement that is available in a barn or free-range system.

Does the RSPCA want people to stop eating eggs?

No. The RSPCA's aim is to ensure the welfare of layer hens. The evidence demonstrates that it is simply not possible to provide for the needs of a layer hen in a battery cage, but that well designed and managed alternative systems can provide for hens' needs. Our aim is to get hens out of cages and into humane alternative systems.

What are the laws in each state/territory regarding battery cages?

All egg producers have to abide by State and Territory animal welfare legislation, but they are exempt from charges of cruelty as long as they abide by the current edition of the *Model Code of Practice for the Welfare of Animals: Domestic Poultry* or its State/Territory equivalent. This code permits the use of battery cages. The code is provided as a guidance document and consequently its standards are not enforceable in their own right unless they have been specifically regulated.

The current regulations controlling battery cages set a minimum floor space for each hen. This is currently 450cm² per hen for hens weighing less than 2.4kg. For cages installed since 2001, the Code states that the minimum size is 550cm², but this change has not yet been regulated in all States and Territories.

Stocking densities and other requirements for alternative systems have not been regulated, which means there can be much variation in the standard of free range or barn housing systems. This is why it is important to choose accredited eggs, such as those under the RSPCA accreditation scheme, which set high welfare standards.

What is happening in the rest of the world?

There are moves to get hens out of cages across the developed world, but the leader in this area is the European Union (EU). From January 2003 in the EU no new battery cages may be installed, and after 2012 all hens must have access to at least 750cm² space, a nest, a perch and litter for dustbathing and scratching. Switzerland has already banned battery cages (since 1992) as have several provinces in Austria.

Why haven't cages been banned in Australia?

RSPCA Australia and other animal welfare groups have worked concertedly to try to bring an end to the use of battery cages in Australia. In 1999 the Australian Government began a review into the housing of layer hens. The issue was intensely debated by the RSPCA and other animal welfare groups and the egg production industry. RSPCA Australia argued strongly and at every opportunity to phase out the use of battery cages in Australia. Sadly, despite the overwhelming evidence that hens suffer in cages, in 2000 the Council of State and Territory Agriculture Ministers (ARMCANZ) decided that cages would continue to be used for the foreseeable future.

Some small improvements for caged hens came out of the 2000 ARMCANZ decision: to increase the floor space per hen from 450cm² to 550cm². This change applied to new cages installed after January

2001 and older cages that did not meet previous standards set in 1995. Many producers resisted even this tiny improvement, and even in 2006, not all States have put this change into legislation.

If battery hen farming is cruel, why can't the RSPCA prosecute?

The RSPCA can only prosecute egg producers if they are breaking the law or contravening regulations that set minimum standards for battery cages. Farmers who provide their hens with the minimum 450cm² per bird cannot be prosecuted, even if we believe this is a cruel practice.

The RSPCA works both to enforce existing laws and to change laws to improve the welfare of animals. Getting hens out of battery cages is one of the RSPCA's key campaign aims and includes putting our message across to politicians, farmers and other key decision makers, as well as raising public awareness of the issue.

References

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