

Use of battery cages for hens in the egg production industry

Supplementary Question for Prof Christine Parker after 14 Aug appearance:

In your submission, you referred to new technologies for egg production. What specifically were you referring to?

Our interviews with free range egg producers indicated that one of the barriers to free range egg production was the lack of appropriate housing and management systems for free range hens. Moving away from cage production to free range systems requires quite different technologies including barn design, feeding systems, egg collection systems, outdoor ranges with appropriate cover and enrichment and also animal monitoring (which may include via use of automated technologies) and care by skilled workers. These technologies must all be designed to maximise the time hens can be out on the range while also providing adequate cover and protection from predators, and at the same time allow for efficient collection of eggs and effective feeding and opportunities for other behaviours (such as dust bathing).

Interviewees told us that there are only a couple of major producers of barns (and cages) and associated computerised monitoring and egg collection systems for large scale egg production, and that these companies are based in the northern hemisphere and had traditionally been focused only on cage and barn production. Therefore there was a lag in being able to procure appropriate equipment for free range production in Australia. However as more of the world goes cage free, new barn designs and other technologies will be developed (although not always with Australian weather conditions in mind).

A number of the small to mid scale producers we interviewed told us that they had to develop their own housing and management systems partly through trial and error as appropriate technologies were not available commercially at all. Indeed at the time of our interviews, it seemed that every small scale free range producer had developed and built themselves their own method of housing birds, meaning that each had to put time and capital into that process rather than being able to buy housing systems “off the shelf”, and that this was a disincentive to free range production. We were also told that at least one of the large scale producers had sought to obtain a competitive advantage by investing heavily in a completely new barn system from overseas in order to enable free ranging ahead of competitors. Features such as doors that open and close automatically according to time and weather conditions, and bird houses or barns that can move around (on wheels or tracks) so that hens can go out onto different parts of the range were among the specific new features required to facilitate free range production. I expect that as production moves away from cages, there will need to be much innovation in new technologies for production.

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