

**INQUIRY INTO USE OF BATTERY CAGES FOR HENS IN
THE EGG PRODUCTION INDUSTRY**

Organisation: Animal Protectors Alliance

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Legislative Council Select Committee on the Use of Battery Cages for Hens in the Egg Production Industry

Submission from Animal Protectors Alliance

1. Cruelty inherent in current housing systems

Battery cages are inherently cruel; they are inherently more cruel than other intensive poultry housing systems (which are by no means kind), because they prevent hens from engaging in any of the behaviours that are essential to their physical and emotional well-being:

- stand up or turn around without walking on a cage-mate;
- stretch their wings;
- lay their eggs in privacy;
- dust bathe, preen or keep themselves clean;
- perch on a branch (or pseudo branch) to sleep;
- form social bonds in small family groups;
- stand or sit on a flat, solid surface;
- have a wide range of interesting things to eat.

Additionally, because of the intense crowding, chooks (whether in cages or in crowded barns, or high density free range systems), will sometimes express their frustration and respond to perceived threats from other birds by attacking and cannibalising their own cage mates (as will rats and humans in the same situation).

To prevent overcrowded hens from harming each other, all chicks intended for intensive facilities are debeaked when they are a few days old. This means, at best, that the hooked point at the end of their beak is cut off with a red hot blade, causing the baby bird extreme pain. However, sometimes as much as half or three quarters of the beak is taken. Unlike human finger and toenails, the beak does not grow back and the wound can continue to cause intense pain throughout the animal's life.

The Animal Protectors Alliance (APA) submits that:

- Battery cages be abolished entirely and immediately. The writing has been on the wall on this issue for at least forty years (since the system was abolished in Switzerland). Any egg producer who finds themselves out of pocket as a result of overnight abolition of the battery cage has only themselves to blame.



- All other cage systems for poultry ('furnished' and 'unfurnished') be phased out in a maximum of five years.
- Intensive indoor housing (barn housing) be reviewed to ensure that the full height of the shed is available to all occupants at all times (as per the Swiss 'aviary' system) and that all barn hens have access to a safely fenced and well-vegetated outdoor area for part of the day.
- The densities and environmental conditions for free range hens be reformed to reflect the actual environmental needs of layer hens (eg at least 10 square metres per hen), rather than the current ridiculous overcrowding permitted as a maximum density.
- Ultimately, of course, the climate crisis combined with growing public understanding of animal sentience and consequential rights, will necessitate the abolition of all livestock production, including the egg industry. However, until governments are ready to take the necessary steps to achieve that abolition, or until crashing ecosystems abolish it around our ears, the objective must be to minimise the suffering of livestock animals while they continue to exist.

2. The POCTA regulations that exempts acts of cruelty from prosecution under the Act

Although keeping hens in cages would be classed as cruelty under the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals Acts, the Regulations under the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals Act explicitly permit numerous acts of cruelty.

The problem of exempting routine cruelties from prosecution if they are conducted in accordance with a code of practice or a regulation is ubiquitous across all human treatment of animals in Australia. The Productivity Commission note this in 2016 (Australian Government Productivity Commission. *(Regulation of Australian Agriculture Productivity Commission, Inquiry Report No. 79, 15 November 2016 p20)*)

APA submits that the NSW regulations be reviewed and that all clauses which permit acts of cruelty that would otherwise breach the Act be explicitly prohibited (e.g. beak trimming, overcrowding birds in any housing system, any housing system which does not enable every bird to engage in her full range of natural behaviours and preferences).

3. Cruelty of neglect

In addition to the inherent cruelty of keeping poultry birds in cages, there are many cruelties arising from related management practices. The *raison d'être* for battery cages is to pack the maximum number of chooks into the minimum space requiring the minimum human labour for egg collection and 'husbandry'.



The impacts on birds of this minimisation of space are listed above. The impacts of minimising husbandry have been well demonstrated in the condition of the hundreds of birds that have been rescued from cage systems over the last 30 years, and the veterinary reports obtained on the condition of those birds.

In at least one battery cage facility it has been established that only one shed worker walked the corridors of each shed only once a week. In this particular facility, assuming the worker spent as much as four hours a day in a shed for this task, and worked only on week days, he was apparently expected to fully examine the condition of three and a half hens every second. If he spent a full eight hour day in each shed (unlikely due to the OHS issues – see below) and did it seven days a week, he was expected to fully examine one and a quarter hens every second.

This minimisation of husbandry amounts to neglect on a huge scale. The result were apparent in all the rescued hens and in the vet reports provided on them:

- wings and claws twisted from being caught in the wire;
- bellies and bottoms ulcerated from endless rubbing against the wire;
- hens dehydrated or starving because their stronger cage mates dominated access to the watering points and food tray;
- hens suffocated because other hens had nowhere in the cage to sit other than on top of their weaker cage mates.

In addition, all the birds on the lower tiers of the cage were permanently exposed to the faeces-impregnated dust which permeates the atmosphere inside the sheds and which is as damaging to the lungs of birds as it is to ours.

Additionally, because they have been bred to lay an egg every day throughout the first year of their adult life (3 months old to 15 months old), commercial hens in all housing systems are very prone to various forms of production disease such as egg peritonitis.

The APA submits that regulations relating to husbandry of commercial hens in all housing system be reviewed to set minimum husbandry requirements that allow the physical condition of every hen to be thoroughly examined every day, and that the POCTA be amended to ensure that welfare inspectors are empowered to check industry compliance with regulations at all times, with or without a warrant, and with or without the facility owner/manager's permission.

4. Cruelty of abandonment

In some battery facilities, there is a gap between the bottom tier of cages and the floor boards that run between the cages. This gap, sometimes wide enough for a small human to slip through, is a death trap for the many hens who escape from their cages when sick or dead hens are being removed. Workers



seem to be unable or unwilling to recapture many of them and eventually all such hens drop into the manure pits. We believe that some workers deliberately drop sick or dead hens into the pits as an easy way of disposing of them.

During de-stocking operations hundreds of hens drop (or are dropped) into the manure pits and abandoned

Hens in the pits starve to death if they do not die of dehydration first. Sometimes they try to get out through the fan vents. In facilities where there is no caging around the fans, they are sucked into the spinning blades.

The APA recommends that the regulations be amended to include measures to ensure that no hens in commercial systems are at risk of falling into a manure pit, and that manure pits are checked thoroughly every day to ensure that no birds are trapped in them.

5. Cruelties during de-stocking and transportation

De-stocking operations are done on a 'time is money' basis. Birds are ripped from their cages and stuffed into packing crates where they may remain for up to 24 hours before being slaughtered. According to one worker, almost every bird has at least one limb broken during this process.

The de-stocking process also generally results in large numbers of hens escaping or being dropped into the manure pits. These hens are rarely collected by the facility staff.

The APA submits that the regulations be amended to ensure that:

- all de-stocking operations are overseen by an authorised inspector or independent veterinarian;
- every bird injured during the process is immediately euthanised;
- any bird escaping or intentionally dropped into the manure pits is immediately collected; and
- no bird is transported alive in a crate for longer than one hour.

6. Environmental issues

Intensive animal agriculture, such as battery and barn egg production systems, are many times less efficient in terms of food, water and energy use than extensive animal agriculture:

- energy is wasted transporting grain from cropland to a facility where it can be turned into 'suitable' feed;
- more energy, water and grain is wasted in the process of turning it into 'suitable' feed (ie pulverising and homogenising the grain);
- more energy again is wasted transporting the prepared feed to the intensive facility;



- indoor housing systems use more energy again for indoor lighting and for running the feed delivery and egg collection equipment.

By contrast, grain for open range chickens can be grown close by or on site, and requires no pulverization and homogenization. Additionally, free range chickens can supplement their diet directly from the land on which they range (as long as their use of this land is managed appropriately).

All animal agriculture represents an inefficient use of land, water and energy. Resources which could be used to grow large quantities of vegetable protein directly for human consumption are used instead to grow a tiny quantity of considerably less nutritious animal protein. However, while animal agriculture continues, it is desirable to minimise use of precious resources like land, energy and water by abolishing all intensive farming practices.

Similarly, while both extensive and intensive agriculture are pollution intensive, the concentration of pollution in the smaller space of an intensive facility increases the risk of seepage of high intensity pollution (e.g. from manure, cleaning chemical etc) into waterways where, in their more concentrated form, they are more likely to harm to aquatic and riparian biodiversity. Furthermore, since intensive facilities are often situated closer to residential areas than extensive systems, the environmental and health risks to humans and companion animals are much higher.

The APA submits that all forms of intensive animal agriculture in NSW, starting with all forms of intensive poultry farming, be phased out as soon as possible and the government start planning a benign phase-out of all animal agriculture (before the change is forced on us by ecological catastrophe).

4. Human health and welfare issues

The risk of disease in a population where individuals are forced to be in physical contact with other individuals at all times is extremely high. Additionally, the birds are constantly in close proximity to their own manure, often drenched in it, and always subjected the fumes from it. Rodents inhabiting the manure pits, feeding off the dead poultry birds which end up there add to the risk. This combination of factors means the chances of a serious disease outbreak in intensive facilities is frighteningly high.

In the event of an emergency involving a zoonotic infectious disease in an intensive poultry farm, the quarantine area could include nearby suburbs. Not only would this restrict the residents' ability to attend work and school, to shop, go on holiday, and visit friends and relatives. It could also require them to have their companion animals (dogs and cats as well as birds) euthanised.

In addition to the risk to nearby homes of a disease outbreak in an intensive poultry facility, there are direct health and welfare issues for shed workers. Even with coveralls and face masks, workers in the sheds are bound to breath in some of the manure dust and certainly some of the bacteria it carries. Eyes are generally not protected and any scratches on the skin are vulnerable. Given that some workers may



be exposed to this polluted air every day of their employment, there would seem to be a high risk of workers contracting upper respiratory diseases from the exposure.

Additionally, the psychological damage inflicted on poultry workers by exposure to such a degree and scale of cruelty should not be ignored. Violence towards animals and violence towards humans are closely related. The mass desensitisation of Australian poultry workers is likely to be reflected in many cases of domestic and random violence.

A further issue is the routine use of antibiotics to control bacterial disease in intensive concentrations of animals. This overuse is forcing many species of bacteria to evolve immunity to antibiotics. If this continues, antibiotic treatments may not be available for humans when new diseases begin to arrive as a result of climate change.

The APA submits that, as an urgent matter of public health, intensive animal farming, and especially intensive poultry farming should be phased out as quickly as possible.

5. Economics

Free range, and even intensive barn husbandry of hens is inherently more labour intensive than battery farming. More labour is needed to examine the condition of hens, to surmise which hens have laid eggs and which haven't, to catch and remove hens as needed, and to remove manure.

Barn and free range establishments therefore generate many more jobs than intensive animal farming. By spreading the profits around a much larger number of taxpaying workers, free range egg production makes far more economic sense than intensive egg production.

While having to pay more workers might force egg production facilities to charge more per egg, this would do no more than bring egg prices more in line with the human, animal, health and environmental costs of egg production.

Additionally, a higher price for eggs and other products of animal agriculture might make it easier for the general public to phase out their use of animal products before this change is forced on us by environmental necessity.

Thank you for the opportunity to make this submission. Please do all you can to abolish the abomination of all intensive animal farming starting with the battery cage.

Frankie Seymour
On behalf of the Animal Protectors Alliance
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