

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

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## **Submission to the Select Committee on The Use Of Battery Cages For Hens In The Egg Production Industry.**

As a resident of the ACT where a ban on the use of battery cages has been in force for several years, I urge you to implement similar legislation in NSW to ban the use of battery cages for the housing of layer hens.

### **Background**

Prior to the ACT ban being legislated and implemented, I worked to ban the cages as Convenor of *Free Range Canberra* and stood as a Free Range Canberra Party candidate in the 2004 ACT Assembly elections. I have also been President of Animal Liberation ACT.

### **Battery Cages**

In Australia millions of laying hens spend the bulk of their shortened lives confined in small wire cages with several other hens. NSW is the largest producer of caged eggs in the country.

In a battery cage shed there are long rows of cages stacked up to eight cages high. Three or more hens are jammed into each cage giving each hen about 450 square cm of floor space - less than the size of an A4 page.

They can't move freely, stretch or flap their wings. Hens have a very strong natural instinct to perch and to lay their eggs in privacy in a nest, and these behaviours are completely denied in a battery system.

According to RSPCA Australia, "The welfare of layer hens in battery cages is perhaps the most compromised of all farm animals"<sup>1</sup>.

It is important to note that the production of eggs does not demand that hens be kept in cages. The cages are used simply to maximise profit - they are the cheapest and nastiest system.

Already, many producers are using more humane barn-laid and free range egg systems that provide protection from the elements and predators, while allowing the hens to move around and behave more naturally (perching, dust bathing and so forth).

### **The Five Freedoms**

"The Five Freedoms are internationally accepted standards of care that affirm every living being's right to humane treatment. These standards were developed by Britain's Farm Animal Welfare Council in 1965 and adapted by the Association of Shelter Veterinarians for companion animals in shelters." - Animal Humane Society <sup>2</sup>

The RSPCA and many other bodies concerned with animal welfare have adopted these *Five Freedoms* for the purposes of evaluating the welfare of farm animals. Briefly, these freedoms are:

1. Freedom from Hunger and Thirst
2. Freedom from Discomfort
3. Freedom from Pain, Injury or Disease
4. Freedom to Express Normal Behaviour
5. Freedom from Fear and Distress

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<sup>1</sup> RSPCA Knowledge Base, "What is the RSPCA doing to get hens out of battery cages?" - <https://kb.rspca.org.au/knowledge-base/what-is-the-rspca-doing-to-get-hens-out-of-battery-cages/>

<sup>2</sup> Animal Humane Society - <https://www.animalhumanesociety.org/health/five-freedoms-animals>

The following is an assessment of the battery cage system with regard to the five freedoms.

1. Freedom from Hunger and Thirst

Food and water are usually delivered automatically to the hens though they have to push their heads through the cage and suffer feather loss and skin damage in accessing it.

Less dominant birds, or birds who become sick and weak may have difficulty pushing past the other birds to access the food and water and consequently die.

Debeaking makes it difficult and painful for many to eat and drink.

2. Freedom from Discomfort

Battery hens spend their lives standing on a sloping wire floor which damages their feet. Their claws grow to abnormal lengths due to the lack of natural wear on natural surfaces. These claws can become tangled in the wire.

Everything in their environment is unbearable: the smell, dust, noise, constant confinement and their inability to spread their wings, walk or stretch.

They are so confined that a dead hen can be left for days or weeks, unnoticed in the cage with other hens.

3. Freedom from Pain, Injury or Disease

Wire floors cause painful injuries to feet and legs – any hens rescued from battery cages may take some time before they can stand and walk.

Because battery hens can't exercise, they develop weak bones (osteoporosis). Their bones break easily, so that by the time they reach the slaughterhouse after only one year of laying, one third of them have at least one broken bone. These fractures are undoubtedly painful.

They have the end of their beak cut off to stop them pecking each other. Up to half of the upper beak and one third of the lower beak is cut off when they are chicks. Nerves reach almost to the tip of the beak, so this mutilation cuts through nerves and is very painful. In addition, when the nerves grow back, they form an abnormal tangled mass (neuroma), which causes long-term pain.

Egg producers call this mutilation "beak trimming" to make it sound like cutting fingernails. In fact, it is more like cutting the tip off your finger.

4. Freedom to Express Normal Behaviour

The most obvious failure of the battery cages with regard to the five freedoms is in relation to the freedom to express normal behaviour.

Chooks need to stretch their wings, preen, dust bathe, scratch, perch and lay their eggs in privacy, in a nest. None of these behaviours is possible in a battery cage.

Because hens can't carry out their basic, natural behaviour, they become stressed and frustrated.

## 5. Freedom from Fear and Distress

It is clear that hens crammed into cages with several others have nowhere to shelter when conflict arises - as it often does due to boredom and frustration. This is a source of distress to the birds as is the inability to carry out normal behaviours.

The battery cage system clearly fails to provide hens with the five freedoms.

### Escapees

When the hens reach an age predetermined to be the end of peak productivity, (about eighteen months old) the cages are 'de-populated'. This entails workers moving along the rows of cages and hauling the hens out by their legs and carrying as many as possible to crates into which they are crammed for their journey on trucks to the abattoir.

During this process, and the ensuing re-stocking where young hens are put into the cages, some hens break free and fall to the manure space below the cages. Other hens may join them there when, for example, their cage is opened to remove a dead bird. Birds can die in the manure pit very quickly or may survive for some time living off dropped, broken eggs and feed or the bodies of the dead birds.

Although the number of hens suffering this fate is small compared to the overall population of caged hens their appalling living conditions and neglect typify the attitude of producers to their 'live stock'.

On more than one occasion I have attended a battery cage facility in the period between de-population and re-population in order to rescue these birds living in the manure pits who are otherwise left in the now open shed and subject to predation.

They often suffer from large accumulations of dried faeces on their lower legs, just above their feet, or on their toes. Such accumulations show that the hens have spent many months in the manure having been left to die.

It is extremely gratifying to see these hens after they have had the accumulations soaked and chipped away finally moving with ease before being taken to a sanctuary to live out the rest of their lives.

### Conclusion

As Mahatma Gandhi said, "The greatness of a nation and its moral progress can be judged by the way its animals are treated." I ask you to substitute 'state' for 'nation' and please recommend that battery cages be banned in NSW.

Mike O'Shaughnessy

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*Following are pictures of hens rescued from a battery cage facility in the ACT before the Territory ban was implemented.*

*1. Examples of manure accumulation*



*2. Soaking before cleaning*



*3. The result*

