Submission No 420

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

Organisation: Sentient, The Veterinary Institute for Animal Ethics

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Inquiry into the use of battery cages for hens in the egg production industry

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To the Upper House Select Committee,

Thank you for the opportunity to provide commentary on the use of battery cages for egg production in NSW. As an independent veterinary association that applies animal welfare science and ethical reflection to advocate for the interests of animals, we support an outright ban on battery cage housing for hens.

We submit that the use of battery cages to contain or accommodate hens in the egg production industry is inherently associated with poor animal welfare outcomes that cannot be overcome by improved management practices.

Hens housed in both conventional and newer enriched, cage production systems are subjected to severe movement and behavioural restrictions which affect 100% of the birds and far outweigh any advantages in hygiene or management that can be overcome by careful management in alternative systems.[1] Battery cages have the worst welfare outcomes for laying hens. Australia should be following the lead of the EU and other nations such as New Zealand and Canada by banning battery cage systems for layer hens and affording them the opportunity to express natural behaviours, which is a basic freedom essential for mental and physical well-being. Such highly motivated behaviours include dustbathing in appropriate litter substrate, perching, foraging, exercising (including walking freely, jumping, flying and flapping their wings), exploring and engaging in comfort behaviours such as stretching and preening, none of which are possible in battery cage housing.

Movement restrictions prevent hens from escaping feather pecking by other birds, a multifactorial problem that is associated with elevated stress levels. A common management strategy to address this is beak trimming. This is an invasive surgical procedure that would require anaesthesia and long-term pain relief. Beak trimming is not an acceptable strategy to prevent feather pecking and cannibalism. This problem should be addressed by genetic selection and the provision of foraging materials and other forms of environmental stimulation (such as dust baths, perches and outdoor access) in the context of free-range systems with low stocking densities. Strategies to reduce feather pecking should also include rearing and transfer to the layer farm, litter quality and use, diet, range quality and use and flock health.[2]

Whilst laying hens in all systems are susceptible to osteoporosis due to genetic selection for high production rates and the depletion of bone calcium to form egg shells, those kept in battery cages have the worst bone health due to lack of movement. Consequently, they also have the highest rates of bone fractures during depopulation.[3]

The severe restrictions on movement also place battery cage hens at the highest risk of fatty liver disease, an extremely painful metabolic disease that can cause sudden death due to organ rupture.[4]

Furthermore, the justifications used for maintaining the use of battery cages are invalid. There is evidence that the chance of mortality outbreaks is no greater in alternative versus conventional cage systems.[5]

In 2017, Sentient participated in the public consultation process for the Draft Australian Animal Welfare Standards and Guidelines for Poultry. The process was a missed opportunity to begin phasing out battery cage systems for laying hens. We therefore support any move towards banning battery cages, as this would be aligned with best practice in animal welfare, international standards, community values and the responses to these by supermarkets and other retailers.

On ethical grounds, the continuation of battery cage systems is unacceptable due to the suffering imposed on laying hens. This is clearly documented and does not require further research. Maintaining the use of battery cages would also perpetuate outdated views of poultry as being of low value rather than acknowledging their cognitive, emotional and social complexity, which research shows as being equivalent to that of other birds and mammals.[6]

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