

**Submission
No 424**

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

Organisation: Canobolas Eggs

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Canobolas Eggs

Canobolas Eggs Pty Ltd ABN 13 468 883 494

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NSW Select Committee
Parliament House
Macquarie Street
Sydney NSW 2000

Dear Select Committee

Re: Submission to the Inquiry into the Use of Cages for Hens in the Egg Production Industry

Thank you for the opportunity to present our views to the Select Committee Inquiry into the use of Cages for Hens in the Egg Production Industry.

Our background

We are a farming family from Molong in New South Wales consisting of second and third generation egg farmers. Our business was founded by Mrs Marie Pepper and her husband, the late Mr Ivo Pepper, in January 1955. Since that time, we have been active industry participants during periods that have included both the regulation and deregulation of the egg industry as well as the industry turmoil in NSW following the last round of changes to the rules surrounding cage egg production.

Although we are not big operators by industry standards, we nonetheless deal directly with some of the same retail and wholesale egg customers as larger industry participants so we face many of the same challenges and would encourage the Committee to seek the counsel of egg industry representatives through both NSW Farmers Association and Egg Farmers Australia.

We are greatly concerned about the purpose and possible outcomes from this Inquiry. We employ over 40 people in our local community and have invested much of our lives into this enterprise, of which our cages are an integral part of the product offering we have for our diverse range of customers. Our cages comprise about 40% of our total hen capacity but closer to 50% of our total daily egg production due to the higher productivity and efficiency of the cage production cycle.

In our experience, cage eggs are always in strong demand. We supply eggs to communities throughout the west and central-west like Cobar, Bourke, Cootamundra and Yass right through Dubbo, Orange, Bathurst, Katoomba and Lithgow to the suburbs and communities of the Sydney basin like Mt Druitt, Lidcombe, Fairfield and Richmond. It is an economic reality that a ban on cage eggs will have a disproportionate impact on the most financially disadvantaged people in our society and on some ethnic minorities who consume more eggs per capita. Some of our customers, having been brought up in countries where the availability of abundant, affordable and safe food could not be taken for granted, tell us that they are more than happy to always purchase cage eggs for their families and we certainly have no qualms about feeding any of our eggs to our own children.

General comments

The confinement of laying hens in conventional cages is something that many people in the community feel strongly about but equally, there are many within the community who have very little interest in the topic. We have satisfied ourselves that there are sound scientific, economic and even philosophical reasons to maintain Australia's cage infrastructure indefinitely whilst at the same time carefully considering the welfare conditions of hens in both cage and non-cage production systems through regulatory oversight and industry self-improvement through quality assurance programs.

Simply put, we do not in good conscience believe that eliminating cage egg production entirely is something that any government in Australia should choose to do. Rather, regulators should ensure that there are sensible outcomes-focused expectations relating to core aspects of hen welfare. A wide variety of consumer choices should be respected and permitted to coexist as part of a pluralistic and multicultural society.

We strongly believe that we work very hard in this industry to keep a high quality, non-terminal source of protein available to the people of New South Wales every day at a very reasonable price point and we should celebrate this achievement. The greatest tide in history that has lifted billions of people out of poverty is industrialisation and if the living standards of Australians are to rise, advances in industrialised agriculture must be encouraged, not reversed. We have a reliable and efficient system in place at the moment through the use of conventional cages for a significant portion of egg production. Compared to other countries which have banned cages within their own borders and subsequently become importers of cage eggs from less regulated jurisdictions, Australia has struck a better balance and managed to remain largely self-sufficient in egg production. Maintaining the current cage infrastructure is a sensible way of keeping that productive capacity in place, a wise precaution if our economic fortunes as a nation were to change in the next 10-20 years. Economic growth cannot continue uninterrupted forever.

It is important to understand that "natural" behaviours are not always good. Many of the negative welfare outcomes associated with non-cage systems are attributable to natural behaviours of the hens who are always seeking to weed out the weaker individuals within the flock. The best attempt by the egg industry worldwide over the past 150 years at mitigating harm to hens was initially indoor housing (barn) and then the invention of the modern conventional cage. Conventional cages have allowed commercial production on a large scale whilst limiting the damaging impacts of anti-social flock behaviours. The recent popularity of free-range eggs has seen a regression to the most primitive management environment for commercial layers – the hostile outdoors.

Chickens in their native habitat were originally a fowl that relied on dense shrubbery for protection. They are not native to Australia nor are they designed for self-defence against predators or scavengers like foxes, snakes, eagles or crows. "At least they will die happy" is a glib but ultimately superficial sentiment that is often thrown up in response to these facts by people who will never have to pick up the bodies of the dead hens that would otherwise be alive if they were housed in a cage.

In summary, we would like to make several key points:

1. Non-cage production is more costly and volatile due to the inherent nature and behaviour of chickens and therefore it will always be more expensive and consume more of our scarce resources than properly managed cages to achieve comparable output;
2. The fact of higher mortality in non-cage systems should not be reduced to a mere economic cost but understood as an experience felt by individual chickens as a consequence of human choices where people may legitimately come to different conclusions in their own consciences;
3. Non-cage production (especially free-range) has greater risks and even when done responsibly there are potentially negative consequences for farm workers, biosecurity (food security) and the environment; and
4. We support enforcement of existing rules to ensure that non-compliant production is eliminated.

We conclude our submission with a paraphrase of the famous quote about democracy by Winston Churchill:

It can be said that cages are the worst form of egg production, except for all those other types that have been tried from time to time.

We respectfully offer this submission for your consideration.

Yours faithfully,

Colin Peffer
Director

Josh Peffer
Director

Robert Peffer
Director