

Submission  
No 509

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

**Name:** Dr Kate Hartcher

**Date Received:** 25 July 2019

---

Partially  
Confidential

25 July 2019

**Dr Kate Hartcher – submission to the Select Committee on the use of battery cages for hens in the egg production industry**

I will briefly address the Terms of Reference as my submission to the inquiry into the use of battery cages for hens in the Australian egg industry. I also attach a peer-reviewed publication to my submission, titled '[The welfare of layer hens in cage and cage-free housing systems](#)' which I wrote recently on the topic.

The use of battery cages certainly causes poor animal welfare. Battery cages are internationally recognised as inappropriate housing for hens. They are very small, barren wire cages; a small number of hens is housed in each cage, and the hens spend their entire lives standing on a sloped wire floor. They do not have access to perches, nests, or any flooring material which would allow them to perform normal behaviours. Further, battery cages do not provide enough space for the hens to move properly – they cannot stretch out their wings or adequately perform basic maintenance behaviours.

Layer hens have been genetically selected to lay a very high number of eggs (over 300 a year, compared with their ancestors which only lay 10-15 eggs per year). This means their skeletons become weak due to the calcium required for egg shells. Combined with the lack of movement, hens in battery experience disuse osteoporosis and can become very weak, and sometimes unable to stand. They also have very high rates of bone fractures when they are removed from the cages at the end of their lives.

When poultry are unable to perform motivated natural behaviours, this can cause emotional distress, poorer health, and harmful behaviours such as feather pecking (a behaviour where birds peck and pull out the feathers of other birds which can cause serious welfare issues and mortality). Battery cages have been legally prohibited in the European Union from 2012 (after a phase out period initiated in 1999), in Switzerland from 2002, and in Austria from 2009. New Zealand, Canada, and several states in the United States are also legally phasing out battery cages.

Importantly, modern animal welfare science tells us that in order to have good welfare, animals need to be able to experience positive emotions. The inability for hens to perform normal behaviours or make decisions about their environment in battery cages means that their ability to experience positive mental states is very limited if at all possible.

The Australian public are becoming increasingly disillusioned with the egg industry and the vast majority of Australians oppose the use of battery cages. However, due to various factors, until they are legislatively prohibited, the use of battery cages will continue.

Battery cages are not justified by other considerations. The production and health aspects that can be present in battery cage systems are also present in well designed and managed cage free systems and in furnished cages (incorporating perches, nest sites and dust baths) which are used overseas.

Egg production is a highly efficient industry and phasing out battery cages would not cause a significant detrimental impact on the environment, particularly as they may be replaced by other highly efficient means of production such as aviaries (multi-tier barn systems). Studies have found that those who work on farms with higher welfare practices can experience positive health effects, and that improved animal welfare can result in greater staff satisfaction, and staff who take less time off and have fewer medical expenses.

Poultry industries, governments, retailers and food service companies in various countries are working towards phasing out battery cages to improve hen welfare. Australia currently lags behind the rest of the developed world in layer hen housing systems, and a legislative phase out of battery cages is urgently required across Australia in order to improve animal welfare.

It is important that phase outs are done over appropriate timelines, and that producers have access to information and support in bird health and best practice management for successful transitions to occur. In some instances, government assistance may be beneficial to assist producers in the transition.

Please see my attached scientific review on hen housing systems for further information on the advantages and disadvantages of different egg farming production methods and the relevant scientific literature.

Regards

Dr Kate Hartcher