

Cage-free: The Future of Egg Production in India

The global trend towards food products with organic or animal care certification indicates increasing consumer attention to the manner in which food is produced. As a result of European consumers' outrage about the conditions under which laying hens were kept, barren battery cages are slated to be banned in the European Union (E.U.) beginning in 2012, as are gestation crates for pregnant sows beginning in 2013. In the interim, as public opposition to inhumane animal agriculture practices rises, an increasing number of E.U. supermarkets and restaurants are offering meat, eggs, and dairy products produced with standards for more humane care. Indian suppliers wishing to export to the E.U. should be prepared to meet these standards as well.

This momentum in favour of improved welfare standards for farm animals is expected to continue growing and promises to spread to India. India is home to thousands of animal protection groups and innumerable consumers who are deeply concerned about the welfare of animals. Furthermore, according to a recent report in the Food and Beverage News, 75 percent of the eggs produced in India are consumed by 25 percent of the population living in urban areas. This market segment, similar to consumers in Western nations, is interested in food production systems and can afford to pay a higher price for food produced in a more natural, healthful, and ethical manner.

Cage-free housing systems for laying hens address this demand for a more humane approach to egg production because they allow for the hens' most basic needs such as walking, fully stretching their wings, and laying eggs in nests.

General Features of Cage-Free Systems:

Cage-free systems should, at a minimum, contain separate areas for perching, nesting, and dust bathing. Stocking density should be low to avoid overcrowding and to ensure all birds access to the different sections of the housing system.

A separate area for laying eggs, specifically the availability of covered nesting boxes, is critical to hen welfare. Several leading animal scientists and veterinarians have concluded that a significant source of frustration for battery-caged hens is the lack of nesting opportunity. Hens crave seclusion during oviposition. Indeed, birds in battery cages are often seen trying to hide beneath their cage-mates at this time.

The hens will almost exclusively lay in nesting boxes – making both automated and manual egg collection easy. Although, on rare occasions, cage-free birds may lay their eggs in the litter instead of in nesting boxes, this behaviour can be discouraged, by collecting floor eggs, by avoiding dark, shadowed areas that may attract the hens, and by placing water and feed systems near the nesting sites, so the birds are not drawn away from the nest boxes when they are ready to lay their eggs.

Providing increased ground scratching and foraging opportunity for the birds can mitigate abnormal behaviors. If chickens do not have the opportunity to peck and scratch the ground (part of their natural foraging tendencies), they may be more likely to exhibit

Egg Producers

feather-pecking behaviors. By providing diverse substrate to keep the birds engaged and fulfilled, a producer can minimize aggressive interactions. For example, grains should be mixed into the litter to promote scratching and pecking at the ground. Limestone blocks and straw also make the litter more interesting to birds, thereby diverting them from destructive behaviors.

Proper breed selection also minimizes feather pecking behavior. Calmer, more docile strains are better choices for cage-free systems.

The housing structure for brooders must mirror those under which they will live as layers, as this provides an opportunity for them to learn to use the different sections of the housing system.

Types of Cage-Free Systems:

There are numerous alternatives to battery cages, so producers can select the system that works best for them and the birds. The various systems can be grouped into three basic categories: deep-litter, aviary, and free-range.

Deep Litter Systems:

These single level barn/shed systems are constructed similarly to the housing traditionally used for broiler chickens in Western agriculture. The floor area is solid with a litter of straw, wood shavings, sand, or turf. Deep-litter systems for laying hens also provide nest boxes, and communal water and feeding troughs are placed throughout the facility.

Manure and litter should be removed as often as possible. In order to prevent ammonia build-up, litter depth should be kept to a minimum to facilitate drying of the litter to ensure it is friable. Encouraging the hens' scratching and foraging behavior helps dry the litter also.

Aviary Systems:

Aviaries, or multi-tiered barn systems, have litter floors for exercise and dustbathing, raised nest boxes for laying eggs, and perches at higher tiers for roosting. Placing drinking and feeding stations at every tier encourages the birds to use the entire system. This also ensures that the majority of the manure falls onto manure pits or manure collection belts below higher tiers, and not into the litter or in nesting areas.

Free-Range Systems:

Free-range systems combine a barn system (deep litter or aviary) with continuous daytime access to the outdoors. The outdoor areas should contain a large amount of vegetation and areas with overhead cover. Though resting, nesting, and feeding may still typically take place indoors, free-range systems give birds the opportunity to exercise in fresh air and enjoy a higher level of environmental stimulation.

Economics of Cage-Free Egg Production:

Comparisons between cage-free and battery-cage operations in Europe and the US suggest that cage-free systems have higher feed and labor costs. Capital costs are similar

Egg Producers

among systems with similar stocking densities. A report by the Humane Society of the United States concluded that production costs increase by eight to 24 percent in adopting deep litter or aviary systems. However, producers may receive a premium for cage-free eggs. Research from Australia, Europe, and North America suggests that consumers are willing to pay an average of 17 to 60 percent more for eggs from non-cage systems.

Humane Society International is actively raising awareness about battery cage egg production amongst Indian consumers. We are also working with supermarket chains, asking them to incorporate higher animal welfare standards into their supply chains for eggs. In addition to asking consumers and retailers to exclusively purchase cage-free eggs, we encourage them to pay a premium for this product: cage-free eggs are superior to battery-eggs, since they come from a farm that allows hens the basic freedoms of walking, perching, dustbathing, fully stretching their wings, and laying their eggs in nests.

For more information on cage-free egg production, please visit Humane Society International's website: hsi.org/india/compassion or contact Chetana Mirle (campaign manager) at cmirle@hsi.org, or Nitin Goel (corporate marketing manager) at mobile # 9212487888.

References

Compassion in World Farming, "Alternatives to the Barren Battery Cage For the Housing of Laying Hens in the European Union". 2007.

Folsch, Detlef W. et al., "Comfortable Quarters for Chickens in Research Institutions," Comfortable Quarters for Laboratory Animals, Ed. Viktor Reinhardt and Annie Reinhardt. Animal Welfare Institute. 2002.

Jendral, Michelle, "Alternative Layer Hen Housing Systems in Europe," Report prepared for Alberta Egg Producers and Alberta Farm Animal Care Association. April 2005.

MV Chandrashekar, "Poultry Industry on an Upswing," Food and Beverage News. March 31, 2007.

The Humane Society of the United States, "The Economics of Adopting Alternative Production Systems to Battery Cages". 2005.

The Humane Society of the United States, "Scientists and Experts on Battery Cages and Laying Hen Welfare".

United Kingdom Farm Animal Welfare Council, "Report on the Welfare of Laying Hens". 1997.