

Eurogroup for Animals' pledge

The Hens' Asks

Eurogroup for Animals' hens asks This document lays down minimum requirements to improve the welfare of laying hens kept in barn and free-range systems in the European Union (EU). Specific provisions for parent stock, day-old chicks and pullets, as well as for transport and slaughter operations, are also specified.

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Introduction

In recent years, following the consumers' preferences for higher welfare eggs, cage-free production systems (free-range and barn eggs) have become more popular across the European Union (EU). Retailers and food businesses across the EU have made commitment to phase out caged eggs from their supply chains. Additionally, some Member States - notably Germany, Austria and Belgium - have planned to phase out enriched cages. These Member States joined Luxembourg and Switzerland, that have had the ban in place since long time.

The Eurogroup for Animals' pledge "The Hens' Asks" aims at improving the welfare of laying hens kept in barn and free-range systems in the EU, by laying down minimum requirements for their breeding, rearing, transport and slaughter. This document can be used by organisations to approach food businesses across the EU with the aim to favour the uptake of higher welfare standards in egg production.

Currently, from a legislative point of view, the Council Directive 1999/74/EC lays down minimum standards for the protection of laying hens farmed in the EU; It describes the minimum housing and care requirements for laying hens. However, the Directive and its provisions only apply to birds 'which have reached laying maturity' and therefore it does not cover the pullet rearing phase. This is despite the conditions under which they are raised have a negative impact on their welfare later in life, including problems related to muscle deposition and bone composition. Additionally, mutilations, such as beak trimming, and the use of cages are still allowed, despite the negative impact they have on the welfare of these birds. Indeed, in enriched cages hens do not have enough space and resources to display important behaviours such as dust-bathing, scratching the ground to forage for food, and nesting; rest can be impaired by poor perch design and high stocking density.

By signing this Eurogroup for Animals' pledge, the signatories commit to implement, and/or require their suppliers to implement, all the following requirements in systems where hens are kept and reared for the production of eggs destined to be sold as shell eggs, liquid eggs and egg products. Specific provisions for parent stock, day-old chicks and pullets, as well as for transport and slaughter operations, must also be complied with. The signatories commit to implement all these requirements, including the technical specifications laid down in Annex I and II, by 2025. The deadline for compliance with requirements laid down in Paragraph IV points 12, 13 (on enrichment materials) and 8 (on outdoor areas) can be extended to 2030 only in case of conversion of existing buildings. The deadline for compliance with Paragraph VI point 18 can be extended to 2030 in case of country's lack of slaughterhouses equipped to comply with the requirement laid down in this paragraph.

Requirements:***I. Parent stock***

1. Rearing systems, as well as transport and slaughter operations, for parent stock must comply with the requirements laid down under paragraph IV, V, and VI of this pledge. Rearing systems for male parent stock must comply with the conditions laid down in the European Chicken Commitment (ECC), until when specific housing conditions for parent stock will be developed;
2. Feed restriction practices are forbidden.

II. Male chicks

3. Day old chicks must not be killed. In-ovo sex identification must be performed before the 7th day of incubation. In case of (unplanned) hatching of a male chick, he must be reared at least under the conditions laid down in the ECC, until when specific housing conditions for male chicks will be developed.

III. Pullets

4. Pullets must be reared at least under the conditions to those they will encounter during the laying phase and laid down in paragraph IV, points 5, 6, 8, 9, 10, 11, 12, 13, 14, and 15 of this pledge. Stocking density must not exceed 14 pullets/m². Density must be calculated on the basis of the usable area (i. e surface that is permanently available for the animals).

IV. Laying hens

Space:

5. The use of cages, including colony cages, 'combi systems' and other systems where hens may be confined within the aviary, is not allowed;
6. Hens must be kept in single height barns: aviary systems must not have more than four tiers (i.e., maximum four tiers for aviary systems, no stacking of multi-tier modules allowed);
7. Stocking density must not exceed seven hens/m². Density must be calculated on the basis of the usable area (i. e surface that is permanently available for the animals);
8. Any new barns must be provided with winter gardens (aka verandas) and/or outdoor areas. Outdoor areas must be equipped with enrichments and natural or artificial shelter to encourage exploratory activities and use of the entire outdoor area. Existing barns must comply with these requirements by 2030 [specifications in Annex I];
9. The use of electric wires in the living areas of hens (both building and winter garden) is forbidden;

Environment:

10. Hens must have access to natural light (at least 20 lux daylight) through daylight permeable surfaces (skylights, side windows and/or light wells with shutters to protect animals from sunlight), which are at least 3% of the ground surface of the enclosure. Light intensity in littered areas must be at least 60 lux at animal level. Light sources must be non-fluorescent or of a frequency of at least 100 Hz. Hens must be provided with an uninterrupted period of darkness of at least eight hours on a daily basis;

11. The following air quality parameters must be respected:

- max 20 ppm ammonia,
- CO₂ 3,000 ppm,
- H₂S 0,5 ppm,
- Dust 10 mg/m³.

12. At least one nest for every six hens, covered with soft material allowing hens to sit on it, must be provided;

13. All of the following enrichment materials must be provided:

- perches (at least 18 cm perching space/hen) [specification in Annex II (1)],
- areas equipped for dust bathing [specification in Annex II (2)],
- sufficient and clean litter [specification in Annex II (3)],
- pecking blocks (at least 2 per 1,000 hens),
- straw bales or other suitable pecking substrates [specification in Annex II (4)];

Procedures:

14. Beak trimming is not permitted;

15. Forced moulting is not permitted.

V. Catching and Transport

16. End-of-lay hens must be caught by trained staff, holding a certificate by the Competent Authority. Hens must be handled upright with support around their wings (i. e. the Swedish method);

17. Laying hens must not be transported for more than four hours.

VI. Stunning & slaughter

18. Laying hens must not undergo live inversion and water-bath stunning. Controlled atmosphere stunning (CAS) using inert gas or multi-phase systems, preferably on farm, must be adopted instead.

VII. Auditing

19. All of the above criteria must be verified. Compliance shall be demonstrated by annual third-party auditing and public reporting.

Annex I

Technical specifications for the winter gardens/outdoor areas (Paragraph IV, 8).

The signatories of the Pledge commit to put in place/to supply only from providers that put in place these technical specifications by 2025. The deadline to meet the technical specifications in this Annex is extended to 2030 in case of conversion of existing buildings.

Winter gardens shall be a minimum 20% of the inside floorage and it cannot be used to calculate the stocking density. The structures/shelters are designed in such a way that the behaviour and needs of the chickens are taken into account. The planting/equipping is done in such a way that the chickens can cross open areas and a type of shelter can be reached within 20 meters of any place in the run. A run does not have to be fully planted/equipped, strips along which the chickens can walk can also be created. Planting/equipping may consist of perches, trees, shrubs, corn, wooded bank, uprooted trees, sewage pipes, etc. This also serves as shelter during the winter. The covered run is a cold, covered roaming area, which is directly connected to the enclosure via run openings to which all animals have easy access (by 10 AM at the latest, the hens shall have access to the covered run for an uninterrupted period of at least eight hours). Ideally access to this covered run should be unrestricted. The cold roaming area must be clearly lighter than the interior of the enclosure, must have an outdoor climate, and be protected against weather influences in such a way that it can also be used during bad weather (e.g. by installing windbreak/ventilation mesh). The covered run is located along the entire length of the long side(s) of the enclosure. The distance from the furthest point in the enclosure to the covered run does not exceed 15 meters. Enclosures that have run openings on one side (lengthwise), are not wider than 15 meters. The covered run is separated from the enclosure by a full wall containing run openings. Openings to the covered run are at least 35 cm high and 40 cm wide. At least 2 m of passage opening must be available for every 1,000 chickens. The construction of the covered run, including the roof, prevents condensation formation and excessively high temperatures. The long side of the covered run is at least 70% daylight and air permeable in any case. The covered run is at least 2 m high everywhere. Starting at the beginning of the laying period, the covered run is covered by a layer of litter at least 2 cm thick.

Annex II

Technical specification for the environmental enrichment (Paragraph IV, 13)

The signatories of the ask commit to put in place all these technical specifications by 2025. The deadline is extended to 2030 in case of conversion of existing buildings.

- (1) Perches: at least 18 cm perching space per hen must be provided;
- (2) Dust bathing: There is an extra facility set up in the day quarters of at least 3,5 m² per housing group of max. 1,000 hens. This area must be equipped with peat dust or sandy soil of sufficient quality. In case of larger groups, dust bathing areas must be adjusted accordingly to the proportion 20,9 m² /6,000 hens;
- (3) Litter: The substrate used in bedding must be sufficient (depth of at least 10 cm), clean and it must promote the expression of the exploration behaviour (scratching and pecking) and dust bathing behaviour;
- (4) Straw bales, compressed alfalfa or other suitable pecking substrates must be provided: At least two straw, hay, or alfalfa bales weighing an average of 15-20 kg each are provided every 1,000 chickens. Straw/alfalfa/hay bales are replaced as soon as they are down to the level of the floor (or only 10% of the bale remains). The presence of inedible materials to be explored is recommended, but cannot replace edible materials (e. g. blocks of minerals, grains in the litter).