

Laying hens welfare

BACKGROUND

Each year the European Union (EU) rears more than 400 million laying hens, of which approximately 210 million in enriched cages. These cages are 'enriched' with perches, a nest area and litter. Indeed this has become the most common EU egg production method since unenriched cages have been made illegal in 2012¹. From then on laying hens can be kept in a variety of systems with varying levels of welfare - enriched cages, barns, free range or organic systems (Annex I) - and method of production labelling is compulsory according to a numeric code system that is indicated on each individual egg (0 for organic eggs, 1 for free-range, 2 for barn eggs, and 3 for enriched cages eggs).

Apart from the general farming directive (98/58/EC) that applies to all farmed species, minimum standards for the protection of laying hens are set down in Council Directive 1999/74/EC (Laying Hen Directive). This Directive describes the minimum housing and care requirements for laying hens in cages and alternative production systems. 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, are still allowed if carried out under certain conditions.

CONTEXT

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 Europe². To mirror citizens' expectations on this matter 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 (Luxembourg and Switzerland have had the ban in place since long time).

Despite this, still about 50% of the eggs produced in EU are coming from enriched cages, which pose several animal welfare problems. Indeed, in this system 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. Selection for high productivity is also responsible for additional animal health and welfare problems, such as injurious feather pecking and skeletal injuries .

CONCLUSION:

Chickens are sentient individuals and they should be able to display their natural behaviour whilst experiencing positive affective states. Eurogroup for Animals calls for:

¹ European Council Directive 1999/74/EC

² <https://labellingmatters.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/10/LM-Exec-Summary-of-2013-Landmark-study.pdf>

- [EU ban of enriched cages](#). Member States should work towards a transition to cage-free system for egg production by 2030. Guidelines should be issued by the EU Commission to support farmers in this transition;
- [Trade agreements that impose imported eggs and eggs products to be compliant with improved EU animal welfare standards](#);
- [Revision of the laying hens Directive](#), to make it consistent with the EU ban of enriched cages. Science-based measures to protect pullet welfare should be inserted in the new legislative text;
- [Mandatory labelling scheme of products containing eggs](#), to explicitly inform consumers about the type of rearing system used.

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Annex I_Overview of the different systems used in EU to raise laying hens

