



Vancouver Humane Society

VHS Response to Council Presentation Regarding its Egg Policy Feb. 25, 2008

Introduction:

In response to the presentation by the Woike Family of Farmer Ben's Eggs to Duncan City Council on February 25th, the Vancouver Humane Society (VHS) would like to address the following statements made by the Woike family:

Claim #1. *Free range and free run hens bring predators and rats.*

VHS Response:

Rats can be a problem in any production system, cage or cage-free.

Claim #2. *If they moved to free run/range production, they would need over 300 acres of buildings.*

VHS Response:

Cage-free aviaries are a practical way to house laying hens. Any increase in cage-free systems will be gradual and not require an instant conversion of "over 300 acres of buildings". VHS is simply proposing that institutions and consumers help to increase demand for and thus supply of cage free eggs so that cage-free eggs account for more than 2% of eggs available to consumers.

Having said that, there will no doubt be a requirement for additional land as vertical stacking of cages is no longer possible. However, studies have shown that cage-free aviaries that provide perches and levels allow for increased density than floor-only systems. This enables producers to reduce the amount of land required and increase the number of hens per acre. Even with an increase in land investments, costs per egg are still minimal (1-3 cents per egg). Producers remain "whole" because they have increased land assets/investments, and they are able to control the price of eggs in order to neutralize any increase in costs.

Claim #3. *The "hygienic housing systems" are part of the Recommended Codes of Practice for Poultry, which were developed in coordination with farmers, government and humane societies (such as the same one now telling you a different story).*

VHS Response:

The Recommended Codes of Practice for Poultry were developed by a committee of mainly industry representatives in the 1980's and 90's, with revisions up until 2003. The Canadian Federation of Humane Societies (CFHS) was the only animal welfare organization on the committee. In fact, the committee denied access to other groups such as Animal Alliance Canada who asked to be a part of the review committee.

It is important to note that CFHS does not represent the entire humane community. VHS has never been a member of CFHS. VHS, the Humane Society of the US, and Humane Society International have always opposed battery cage confinement of laying hens, as have many others.

Furthermore, CFHS has informed us that although they participated in the development of the codes, they never endorsed these codes as representing good animal welfare. In fact, some of the older versions of the codes included disclaimers indicating that, although members were present to provide input, it does not mean the codes have the unequivocal endorsement of any member agency. However, for some reason this disclaimer does not appear in more recent versions of the codes.

In regard to CFHS “changing its tune”, given the overwhelming scientific evidence in recent years that demonstrates these systems are not good for the birds’ welfare, we would expect CFHS to change their opinion (as should others on the committee). CFHS states on their web site that these codes are now under revision and CFHS is taking part in the development of new codes.

Finally, the current codes of practice are “recommendations”, not standards. Since recommendations cannot be enforced, practices on battery farms can fall below the minimum recommendations. This was the case with LEL Farms in Guelph, Ontario in 2005. To view the video of what poultry scientists have called “shocking conditions” on LEL farms, go to <http://humanefood.ca/Truth.html> .

Agriculture and Agri-Food Canada’s web site states that “the Canadian poultry industry has developed a code of practice for the handling of poultry”. It goes on to mention that the key players in the egg industry are: “The Canadian Egg Marketing Agency (CEMA), the Canadian Poultry and Egg Processor's Council (CEMA), the Canadian Poultry and Egg Processor's Council (CPEPC), the National Farm Products Council (NFPC), Agriculture and Agri-Food Canada and the Canadian Food Inspection Agency (CFIA)”. There is no mention of the involvement of any humane society. It would appear then that the industry controls the input to codes of practice, not the humane movement. See http://www.agr.gc.ca/poultry/gleg_e.htm

Claim #4. *There are studies being done in Agassiz and California on hen stress which show that hens in hygienically housed facilities don’t suffer any more stress than any other hens.*

VHS Response:

Although the possible presence of predators and aggression from dominant hens would be a source of physical stress that hens may face from time to time in a free-range setting, at least these are natural stressors to which birds can instinctively respond. Forced confinement in battery cages, however, is not only unnatural but the stress is constant - 24 hours per day for their entire lives.

Leading scientific experts, including Dr. Joy Mench of UC Davis in California, have proven that confinement in battery cages does cause stress and frustration, as well as poor health. Leading Canadian Poultry Welfare Scientist, Dr. Ian Duncan of the University of Guelph, has echoed these concerns. See the following link for statements from 18 world-renowned scientific experts and academics who oppose the use of battery cages:
<http://www.hsus.org/farm/experts>

Claim #5. *Canadian Standards for egg operations lead the world.*

VHS Response:

Fundamentally, the Canadian system is identical to that in the US. Although Canadian standards do allow for slightly more space than US systems, this “increase” is scientifically insignificant. Each bird still has less space than a single sheet of paper on which to live. The birds cannot even stretch their wings, let alone engage in other natural behaviours such as nesting and foraging.

As for Canadian standards leading the world, Canadian codes still fall below European standards. For example, in Canada, current codes suggest ~450cm² per bird, whereas in the UK, since 2003, conventional cages must allow for 550cm² per bird. Also since 2003, any new installations must be “enriched” cages that allow for 750cm² per bird along with a nest, perching space and a scratching area.

A report by the European Commission states that there is considerable evidence that banning the use of conventional battery cages for laying hens could considerably improve the health and welfare of these birds. This is why a ban on conventional battery cages is due to enter into force in 2012. And, in certain countries (e.g. Germany), even enriched cages will be banned as of 2012.

See <http://www.thepoultrysite.com/poultrynews/13787/european-commission-report-confirms-benefits-of-ban-on-battery-cages>

Claim #6. *Eggs are cheaper and cleaner and have almost zero salmonella as opposed to free run/range.*

VHS Response:

In 2008, The Soil Association revealed that a UK government study showed that 23.4% of farms with caged hens tested positive for salmonella compared to 4.4 per cent in organic flocks and 6.5 per cent in free-range flocks. The research also showed that the highest prevalence of salmonella occurred in the largest holding size category (30,000 birds or more). This was over four times the average level of salmonella found in flocks closer to the maximum size allowed under Soil Association organic standards.

See <http://tinyurl.com/2pugeg> for more info.

Still others argue there is no difference in food safety between cage and cage-free eggs. A 2004 study by the UK Food Standards Agency found no significant differences in *Salmonella* contamination of eggs produced in cages, deep litter, free-range, and organic systems. Other studies have found the incidence of *Salmonella* is influenced more by the genetics of the layer hen strain than by housing.

See http://www.hsus.org/farm/resources/research/pubhealth/food_safety_eggs.html

Claim #7. *Why would Council not work with the agricultural industry on improving and facilitating better animal welfare and production systems?*

VHS Response:

Industry generally responds to market forces, and if consumers are requesting better health and welfare for egg-laying hens, industry should step up to meet this demand. City councils everywhere are proactively helping the industry move forward by creating demand for such products, and thus gradually improving the conditions in which hens live and eggs are produced. The egg industry and marketing boards need to address the current quota system and remove the restrictions placed on the quantity of cage-free eggs (particularly organic eggs) that are allowed to reach the consumer market.

Claim #8. *If consumers have misinformation, they could make unwise and potentially dangerous decisions for themselves and their families. Those who choose to go the cage-free route should investigate under what circumstances those potentially dangerous eggs come from.*

VHS Response:

We absolutely agree that consumers should know the conditions and circumstances under which all food is produced. Consumers should know just as much about the conditions in battery systems as in cage-free systems. As for cage-free eggs specifically, VHS does not endorse free-run or free-range systems that would put the public, or the birds, at risk. It is the egg industry's job to enforce appropriate health and food safety standards within cage, cage-free and free-run production systems. The organic industry is able to do so with its free-range producers, and supposedly inspections take place for cage systems, so there should be no reason why the same can't be done for non-organic, cage-free producers.

Claim #9. *A great percentage of the purchasing public doesn't have the ability to make a choice on any other marker other than price.*

VHS Response:

Many who are opposed to cage-free systems and the higher priced egg they create feel this is becoming a class issue in that low income individuals cannot afford to eat cage-free eggs.

Research studies published to date show that it costs less than one penny per egg more to produce a cage-free egg than it does to produce a battery egg. While it's possible that giving animals better living conditions may increase the retail cost by a few pennies per dozen, the hidden cost of continuing to keep them in such inhumane confinement is increased cruelty, and it is the animals who are paying that extra price.

Furthermore, if it only costs a farmer a penny more to produce free range eggs, then it appears the mark-up we see in the grocery stores is obviously a function of pricing, not of cost. This would be controlled by the egg marketing boards and the retailers themselves, and thus it is with these organizations that the issue of high prices needs to be addressed. After all, if cost was the issue, then Denny's and Burger King could not afford to offer products using cage-free eggs at the same price as products using battery eggs.

VHS Summary:

In summary, what are VHS, City Councils and concerned consumer groups asking our farmers to DO?

VHS is asking farmers to raise birds in a quality, cage-free environment as opposed to confining them in cages that disrespect the fundamental physical and emotional needs of these sentient beings.

In the short term, we will alleviate suffering for a significant number of chickens. This will also increase the current supply of cage-free eggs on the market, giving consumers more choice, and enabling more competitive pricing amongst cage-free products. In the UK, free range and organic systems accounted for around 32% of eggs produced in the UK in 2006 (*source: British Egg Information Service*). There is no reason why free range and organic systems in Canada should be limited to 2% of the market.

In the long term, the egg industry and governments will recognize the many benefits of moving away from mechanized, factory production systems that limit the freedom of chickens and consumers.