Cooped Up Hens: Cage v. Cage-Free Eggs

by Natasha Farmer, Staff Member

Egg-laying hens used for commercial egg production in the United States have been kept in cramped cages for many years. This has caused many states to start banning restrictive livestock cages and shift the hens to open pens. Seven states have passed laws that will eventually ban or limit the different types of livestock cages. *Chicken Rules have Unintended Consequences*, Drovers, April 26, 2010, available at http://www.drovers.com/news_editorial.asp?pgID=675&ed_id=7240.

However, open pens have resulted in many unintended consequences. After decades of breeding,
hens' territorial instincts have been boosted, which has made the hens more prone to pecking attacks "so fierce they are often called cannibalism." Id. Ian Duncan, a professor emeritus of animal welfare at University of Guelph in Guelph, Ontario, stated that cannibalism is a learned behavior, which is passed from one territorial hen to another. Id. Experts have warned that this behavior will increase if hens are moved from small cages with five to ten birds to open pens that can hold dozens. Id.

The Coalition for Sustainable Egg Supply ("CSES") leads a co-operative effort toward understanding egg supply, and boasts large and diverse constituent members including Bob Evans Farms Inc., McDonald's Corp., and United Egg Producers. Rod Smith, Group Begins Hen Housing Study, FEEDSTUFFS, April 9, 2010, available at http://www.feedstuffsfoodlink.com (http://www.feedstuffsfoodlink.com/ME2/dirmod.asp?id=5115&type=news&mod=News&mid=9A02E3B98F2A615ABC72CB5FF14C10&tier=3&nid=1E47C08FB220C4B13D6A18B5A5D9D73R2). One of the primary objects of CSES concern is to evaluate the extent that different housing systems for egg-laying hens can provide both "hen well-being and egg supply that is affordable and sustainable." Id. The Coalition's mission is to evaluate the sustainability impact of three different types of egg laying systems: cage-free aviary housing systems, enriched housing including perches and nests, and caged housing environments. Coalition for Sustainable Egg Supply, http://www.sustainableeggcoalition.org/prod/ (http://www.sustainableeggcoalition.org/prod/) (last visited Jan. 28, 2010). The project has yet to yield published results. Id.

There seems to be no right answer in this ongoing matter. It is inhumane to keep hens in such close quarters. However, if you allow the hens to roam freely in open pens serious injury could occur. Hopefully, the CSES will discover the best solution through ongoing research, but the answer may not come soon enough.

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