

Cage-free Hens Pushed to Rule Roost



By Elizabeth Weise,
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By John Patriquin, Portland Press Herald via AP
Hens are seen in a cage-free environment in a Maine poultry house.

When the Easter Bunny comes hop-hop-hopping along this year, he may be carrying something a little different in his basket.

A wave of colleges and universities, along with big-name employers such as America Online, food-service purveyors, restaurants and even high schools, have either eliminated or reduced their use of eggs from caged hens.

Egged on by a yearlong campaign by the Humane Society of the United States, colleges and universities that have instituted the policy include Yale, Tufts, Dartmouth, Vassar and the University of Wisconsin. Another 80 schools made the switch when food service company Bon Appétit Management, which supplies their dining halls, went cage-free last October.

"The quality of life of a cage-free hen is so much better than the quality of life of a battery-cage hen that this campaign is meant to move the industry in that direction," says Paul Shapiro of the Humane Society.

In conventional egg production, hens live in what are called battery cages. In this case, the word "battery" means "array," as in a stack of cages that can be as much as two stories high.

There are about six hens to a cage, and each hen get up to 67 square inches of floor space, about 3/4 of a sheet of notebook paper, says Mitch Head of the United Egg Producers.

Definitions of humane

The industry group does not agree that cage-free is more humane. Conveyor belts carry away manure twice a day, and fans keep the air fresh, Head says.

The birds "all are able to feed at the same time, they all are able to drink water at the same time. They're able to stretch their wings, but they're not able to dust bathe. ... Scratching is something they're not able to do in the cages, but that's basically just to keep their claws shortened," Head says.

Animal rights groups say hens need to scratch and dust bath, which is filling spaces between their feathers with dust to ward off insects.

An underlying goal of the campaign against eggs from caged hens is than eggs from caged hens.

Cage-free hens have the run of an indoor space.

"A rule of thumb is that you need at least four to six times the space to have the cage-free hens," says David Radlo of Radlo Foods, a major East Coast egg producer based in Watertown, Mass.

And cage-free eggs are cracking out of the granola-and-sprouts crowd to show up in supermarkets, restaurants and schools across the nation. "My cage-free are going up 10% to 20% a year. They just keep on increasing," Radlo says.

Free-range hens have access to the outdoors, from a space as big as a yard to as little as a porch.

Not that the hens actually want to go outside, says Michael Sencer of Hidden Villa Ranch, an egg distributor in Fullerton, Calif., that does about \$125 million a year worth of business. "Most don't. They are very squeamish birds; they're very defenseless. They know they have predators out there."

So even that egg-savvy bunny himself might be a little confused about the choices on store shelves.

It's not just the hens that are different; it's the eggs themselves.

Conventional, cage-free and free-range eggs jostle for shelf-space in America's supermarkets with eggs that are touted as either organic, high in omega-3 fatty acids or brown. And the specialty eggs are winning, despite prices that can be as much as \$3.00 a dozen higher than conventional white eggs.

Overall U.S. egg sales dropped from 2.02 billion dozen in the 52 weeks ending March 2002 to 1.84 billion dozen in the 52 weeks ending March 2006, an 8.6% decrease over the past four years, according to ACNielsen.

EGGS-ACT TERMS

The major terms used on labels to describe eggs:

Conventional: Hens live in stacked "battery" cages, usually six chickens to a cage with up to 67 square inches of floor space per chicken.

Cage free: Hens live on the floor of a barn rather than in cages.

Free range: Hens either live outdoors or have some access to the outdoors.

Organic: Hens are fed a vegetarian diet that was grown without any herbicides, commercial fertilizers or fungicides.

Omega 3: Hens are fed a diet containing 10%-20% ground flaxseed, which produces eggs with slightly higher amounts of polyunsaturated fatty acids (also found in fish and fish oils).

Hormone free: No egg-laying hens in the USA are given hormones.

Antibiotic free: No hens in the USA are given antibiotics while laying eggs. A hen would only be given antibiotics if it were ill and had stopped laying eggs.

Brown: Brown eggs are produced by brown-feathered hens. There is no nutrient difference between brown and white hens fed identical diets.

Natural: Just a cosmetic term. No regulated meaning.

Source: United Egg Producers, U.S. Department of Agriculture

Specialty eggs popular

Sales of organic eggs per dozen went up 32% during those four years.

Sales of eggs from hens fed a special diet to decrease their eggs' cholesterol and increase heart-healthy omega-3 fatty acids almost doubled in that period, as did eggs labeled "natural," although the term has no regulated meaning. Even brown eggs, which are exactly the same as white eggs except for their color, were up 23%.

In the pecking order of eggs, names aren't all they're cracked up to be. As far as the Department of Agriculture is concerned, all eggs are "natural."

Low cholesterol and high omega-3 eggs are better nutritionally, but experts say most people don't eat enough eggs for it to make a huge difference in their diet.

Organic, cage-free eggs are among the most expensive. Under federal organic rules, the hens must be housed cage-free with access to the outdoors and fed only certified organic vegetarian feed.

"The cost of feeding organic is a huge difference compared to the difference of feeding cage free," says Tony Dryak, president of Farmers Organic Foods in Alma Center, Wis., and head of the Cage Free Coalition.

However much they cost, enjoy them while you can. If avian influenza hits the USA, the USDA could require that all outdoor chickens be brought inside to keep them away from possible contagions.

DOZENS OF PRICE RANGES

Egg prices vary tremendously across the country, but David Radlo of Radlo Foods provides some estimates per dozen large eggs:

Conventional: \$0.79-\$1.50

Low cholesterol/ high Omega3: \$1.99-\$3.29

Cage free: \$2.09-\$3.49

Free-range: \$2.79-\$4.49

Organic: \$2.79-\$4.99