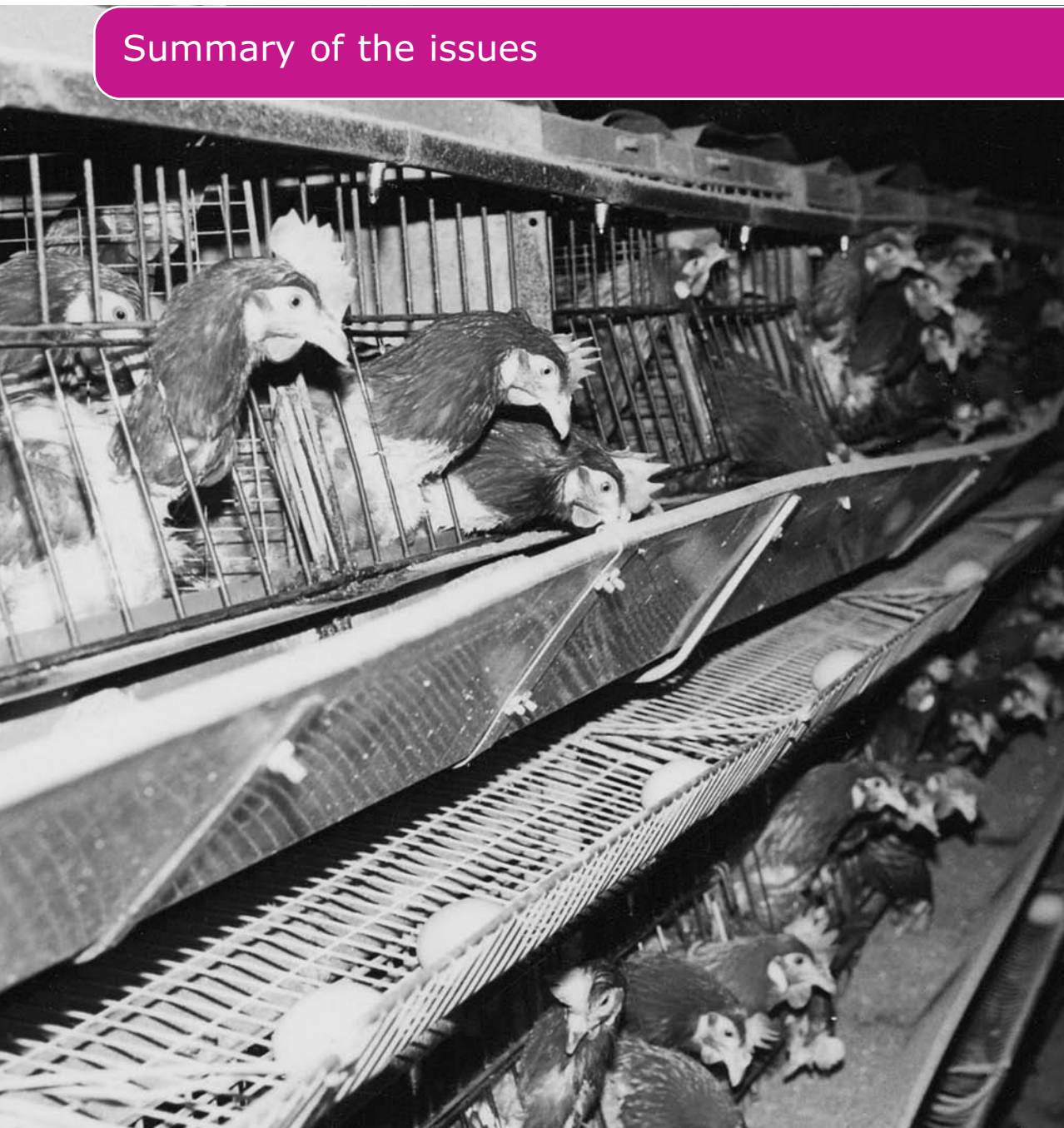


THE WAY FORWARD FOR EUROPE'S EGG INDUSTRY: KEEPING THE BAN ON BATTERY CAGES IN 2012

Summary of the issues



The majority of egg-laying hens in the European Union are kept in barren battery cages that are so small the birds cannot even flap their wings. This system is due to be banned in 2012 but some within the industry are calling for the ban to be postponed. This summary report shows that scientific evidence and public opinion strongly support the animal welfare case for the ban to be introduced without delay.

Introduction

There are over 400 million laying hens in the European Union (EU), around 88% of whom are currently housed in battery cages. The 1999 Laying Hens Directive prohibits conventional barren battery cages from 1st January 2012. The Directive represents a historic victory for animal welfare. But the enormous welfare benefits of this vital piece of legislation are now under threat because the industry is calling for the ban to be delayed. Official sources suggest this could be by up to 10 years. This would condemn around 3.5 billion more laying hens to a life of confinement, deprivation and suffering.

The EU egg industry is concerned that the battery cage ban will lead to a rise in production costs and that this, coupled with a reduction in import tariffs that is likely to be agreed as part of World Trade Organisation (WTO) negotiations, would leave them vulnerable to imports of cheap eggs that do not meet EU welfare standards. However, this summary report will show that the ban can be successfully implemented in 2012 without harming the livelihoods of EU egg producers.



In 1997, the EU adopted a legally binding Protocol which recognises animals as sentient beings. The Protocol requires the EU and its Member States, in formulating and implementing EU policies on agriculture, to pay full regard to the welfare requirements of animals. In light of this, Compassion in World Farming Trust (CIWF Trust) believes the EU cannot ignore the huge body of evidence for the suffering of hens in barren battery cages, which is supported by both public opinion and the conclusions of the European Commission's own scientific advisors – the Scientific Panel on Animal Health and Welfare. CIWF Trust believes the ban on battery cages must be implemented without delay in 2012.

Restriction of natural behaviour in the battery cage



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Hen in motivational experiment working to reach a nest box.

The lack of space and barren environment in the battery cage prevent hens from carrying out most of their natural behaviours, including nesting, foraging, dust-bathing, perching, and many basic movements such as stretching and wing flapping.

Experiments have shown that hens will make a great deal of effort to gain access to nest boxes, litter for pecking, scratching and dust-bathing, perches (particularly prior to nightfall) and additional space. For example, hens will overcome high costs (e.g. squeezing through narrow gaps or opening doors) to gain access to nest boxes prior to laying. Research has revealed that hens will work significantly harder to gain access to a nest box prior to laying than they will work to gain access to food after several hours' food deprivation. Such experiments demonstrate

that these resources are important to the hen.

Nesting

In natural conditions, hens will seek out a secluded spot and build a nest to lay their eggs in. Frustration of nesting is widely accepted as the most severe behavioural problem of hens in battery cages. If hens are deprived of a suitable nest site they will display abnormal behaviours, which indicate frustration, such as increased pacing and restlessness or abnormal behaviour in the form of vacuum nesting.

CIWF Trust believes that hens suffer when they are prevented from laying their eggs in a nest and that all laying hens should therefore have access to a suitable nest site.



Hen nesting in non-cage system.



Hen dust-bathing in free-range system.

Foraging and dust-bathing

In natural conditions, hens spend over half of their waking time foraging for food. Hens are still motivated to forage even when provided with adequate food. They also carry out regular maintenance behaviours including preening and dust-bathing. Hens are highly motivated to dust-bathe. Under unrestricted conditions, hens will dust-bathe about every second day, with each dust-bathing bout lasting on average nearly half an hour.

On the barren floor of the battery cage, hens are denied access to earth or loose litter material for foraging and dust-bathing. The lack of opportunity to express foraging behaviour can result in hens redirecting their pecking behaviour towards other birds in the form of harmful feather pecking. Without access to litter, hens develop sham dust-bathing behaviour in which they go through the motions of dust-bathing but become frustrated by its ineffectiveness.

CIWF Trust believes that hens suffer when they are prevented from foraging and dust-bathing and that all laying hens should therefore have access to loose litter material in which to carry out these behaviours.

Perching

In natural conditions, hens roost at night as a means of protection from ground predators. They are therefore highly motivated to perch. Hens that are denied access to a perch show signs of agitation and increased movement around dusk. In the barren battery cage there is no opportunity to perch and hens are forced to spend their entire adult life standing on a bare wire floor.

CIWF Trust believes that hens suffer when they are denied the opportunity to roost and that all laying hens should therefore be provided with elevated perches.



This picture of a hen with its wings outstretched illustrates just how cramped conditions are in the battery cage.

Lack of space

Each battery hen has just 550 sq cm of floor space, an area less than an A4 sheet of paper. They are unable to move about properly, stretch, flap their wings, or even turn around without difficulty.

CIWF Trust believes that all laying hens should be provided with sufficient space to allow them to perform their full range of natural movements and behaviours.

The restrictive environment of the battery cage also causes hens to suffer from chronic stress because they are housed so close together. Forcing hens into such close proximity disrupts normal social interaction and they will continually strive to get further apart.

CIWF Trust believes that all laying hens should be provided with sufficient space to allow them to engage in normal social interaction and to withdraw from other hens.



Hens perching in non-cage system.

The Scientific Panel on Animal Health and Welfare (AHAW) was requested by the European Commission to conduct a detailed review of laying hen welfare in various housing systems. In their Opinion, published in 2005, they effectively rule out barren battery cages as an acceptable housing system for laying hens on the basis of the restriction of behaviour imposed by the battery cage. They state that one of the most severe threats to bird welfare in conventional battery cages is "the inability to perform some high priority behaviours including nesting, perching, foraging and dust-bathing" and that "if hens can not perform such high priority behaviours, this may result in significant frustration, or deprivation or injury, which is detrimental to their welfare". They therefore recommend that "Housing systems should provide the possibility for hens to carry out activities which are behavioural priorities." ***CIWF Trust believes there is overwhelming evidence that hens suffer in battery cages because they are prevented from carrying out most of their natural behaviours. The use of barren battery cages for the housing of laying hens should therefore be ended as a matter of urgency.***

Health problems and injuries in the battery cage

Brittle bones

The high rate of egg production in modern laying hens puts enormous demands on the birds' calcium reserves. With no opportunity for exercise to maintain bone strength, caged hens develop brittle bones, a condition known as caged layer osteoporosis or caged layer fatigue. This is a direct result of the restriction of movement imposed by the battery cage.

Osteoporosis accounts for around a third of deaths in caged laying hens and many of these deaths will be lingering and painful. The affected bird becomes paralysed and if the condition goes unnoticed the hen often dies a slow death at the back of the cage from dehydration and starvation because they are unable to reach water and food.

By the time they come to be slaughtered after around a year of laying, the birds' bones have become so weak that around 30% of hens from battery cages suffer broken bones during handling, transport and slaughter.

CIWF Trust believes it is totally unacceptable to keep hens in an environment where their movement is so restricted that they develop brittle bones and are likely to suffer broken bones as a result. All laying hens should have the freedom to exercise properly.

Foot and claw damage

By the time they come to be slaughtered, hens in battery cages often have injured and deformed feet as a result of damage caused by constantly standing on a sloping wire floor. In natural conditions, the claws of hens are continually worn down as they forage for food. In the battery cage, claws can become overgrown, twisted and broken. The claws can also be very sharp and cause injuries, which can lead to cannibalism. Several birds may join in pecking at the injury; in the battery cage there is no means of escape and death of the pecked bird usually results.



Battery cages within the EU must now be fitted with abrasive strips to shorten the claws. However, this will only tackle the symptoms instead of addressing the underlying cause of the problem: the lack of opportunity for hens to exercise and perform normal behaviour which wears down the claws naturally.

CIWF Trust believes that all hens should be kept in an environment where they can move around freely and forage to keep their claws in good condition.



This ex-battery hen has clearly suffered a broken limb.

Alternatives to the barren battery cage

When the ban on barren battery cages comes into force, CIWF Trust is concerned that many cage producers will change to using so-called "enriched" cages. These cages contain a nest, perches and loose litter material but fail to overcome many of the welfare problems inherent in the battery cage system. We believe that farmers should instead turn to more humane free-range and barn systems where hens have the freedom to express natural behaviour.

CIWF Trust believes the potential of systems to provide good welfare should be the key factor in deciding which housing systems are considered acceptable. Many of the welfare problems of hens housed in cages are inherent in the system. Therefore even if management is good, the welfare potential in cages is low. Welfare may be poor for some individuals or at certain times in non-cage systems but if housing design and management are good, the welfare potential in non-cage systems is high.

CIWF Trust believes that only non-cage systems should be permitted for the housing of laying hens because these are the only systems with high welfare potential.

Changing to more humane non-cage systems will entail a cost but this summary report will show how this cost can be met without harming the livelihoods of EU egg producers.



Economics of the EU ban on barren battery cages

A free-range egg costs around 2.6 eurocents more to produce than a battery egg, and a barn egg costs around 1.3 eurocents more to produce than a battery egg. CIWF Trust believes that farmers should not be left to bear the higher production costs themselves. The increased costs can be met by a combination of government support and consumers paying a little more for eggs. For individual consumers the extra cost of eggs should amount to just a few eurocents per week.

The higher costs involved in the production of barn and free-range eggs are more than compensated for by the higher prices received by producers for these eggs. As a result, barn and free-range producers receive better gross and net margins than cage producers. Skilful marketing should preserve better margins for producers of non-cage eggs when the ban on barren battery cages comes into force.

A recent analysis revealed that the estimated non-market benefits, in terms of the value placed by citizens on the improvements in hen welfare resulting from the prohibition of barren battery cages, outweigh the costs arising from the prohibition.

The increase in imports following the battery cage ban is likely to be less than that usually anticipated. A socio-economic report commissioned by the European Commission states that a 20% increase in costs, which it says is the type of percentage increase in terms of variable costs that producers are likely to face as a result of switching to free-range, will lead to an increase in imports of up to 3-4%. The impact of this is likely to be minor because the rise in imports is from a very low base.

Strategy for adhering to the ban on barren battery cages and also safeguarding EU egg producers

CIWF Trust believes the European Commission and the EU egg industry should develop a strategy that will enable the ban on barren battery cages to come into force on 1st January 2012 (the date set by the Laying Hens Directive) whilst also safeguarding EU egg producers. CIWF Trust proposes that this strategy should comprise the following elements:

- The Commission should take the lead in bringing together all the key stakeholders – the industry, consumer bodies, supermarkets, public sector bodies, food manufacturers and the foodservice sector – and persuade them of the desirability of supporting the EU ban on barren battery cages.
- Consumers should be encouraged to support this important welfare reform by only buying non-cage eggs; a recent Eurobarometer survey on the welfare of farmed animals shows that the majority of EU consumers are willing to do this.
- Supermarkets, public sector bodies, food manufacturers and food service operators should be encouraged to only use and sell eggs and egg products produced in non-cage systems. A number of supermarkets and food service operators already have such a policy. Retailers played a vital role in the success of the move away from battery cages in Switzerland and Sweden.
- Government support was instrumental in ensuring the success of Switzerland's move to non-cage production. EU Member States should help farmers with part of the costs of moving to non-cage systems under the "Investment in Agricultural Holdings" measure of the Common Agricultural Policy's Rural Development Regulation.
- The EU should re-energise its efforts at the World Trade Organisation (WTO) negotiations to obtain outcomes that will help safeguard EU egg producers from imports of eggs from hens kept in barren battery cages. In particular, the EU should (i) work hard to secure inclusion of animal welfare payments in the Green Box and (ii) classify egg product lines as 'sensitive'. Sensitivity classification would enable the EU to apply a lower tariff reduction than would otherwise be the case.
- The EU should extend the regulation requiring EU eggs and egg packs to be labelled with the farming method to imported eggs; there are sound legal arguments for believing that this could be done in a manner that is compatible with the WTO Agreement on Technical Barriers to Trade.

Conclusions and recommendations

- The highly restrictive and barren nature of the battery cage prevents hens from carrying out most normal patterns of behaviour, such as foraging, perching, dust-bathing and laying their eggs in a nest. This results in severe frustration.
- The lack of opportunity to exercise in the battery cage, coupled with the constant demands of a high rate of egg production, causes battery hens to develop such brittle bones that many suffer from broken bones by the time they come to be slaughtered after around a year of laying.
- In light of the status of farm animals as sentient beings and the obligation under EU law to pay full regard to the welfare requirements of farm animals, CIWF Trust believes the EU ban on barren battery cages in 2012 should not be delayed.
- The increased costs of producing eggs in more humane non-cage systems can be met by a combination of government support and consumers paying a little more for eggs. The extra cost of eggs for individual consumers should amount to just a few eurocents per week.
- CIWF Trust recommends implementing the strategy outlined in this summary report to ensure that the ban on barren battery cages can be successfully brought into force in 2012 without harming the livelihoods of EU egg producers.

The evidence that hens suffer in barren battery cages is overwhelming and is supported by both public opinion and the conclusions of the European Commission's own scientific advisors – the Scientific Panel on Animal Health and Welfare. Compassion in World Farming Trust calls on the European Union to ensure that the ban on battery cages is implemented without delay in 2012.



An extended and fully referenced version of this report is available from Compassion in World Farming Trust at the address below and at www.ciwf.org

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