



University of Connecticut  
*College of Agriculture and Natural Resources*

Department of Animal Science

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TO: COMMITTEE ON ENVIRONMENT  
CT House of Representatives

FROM: Michael J. Darre, Ph.D., P.A.S.  
Professor and Extension Poultry Specialist  
Department of Animal Science  
University of Connecticut  
Storrs, CT 06269-4040  
860-486-1008  
Michael.darre@uconn.edu

RE: Proposed Bill No. 5811 LCO No. 2267  
AN ACT CONCERNING BATTERY CAGES AND EGG LAYING HENS

I have been the extension poultry specialist at the University of Connecticut for 28 years and in that capacity I have worked with all types of poultry and poultry producers, from the homeowners with one chicken to the commercial producers with millions of chickens. I also serve as the extension poultry specialist for New England. My Ph.D., from the University of Illinois, is in Environmental Animal Physiology and I consider myself somewhat knowledgeable about housing and management of poultry. I teach courses in Introduction to Animal Science, Principles of Poultry Science and Behavior and Training of Domestic Animals at the University of Connecticut.

I wish to enter my testimony at this time because I became quite concerned when I read the following from proposed bill no. 5811:

*Be it enacted by the Senate and House of Representatives in Genral Assemble convened:*

*That the general statutes be amended to require that battery cages in which egg laying hens are confined be of a size that ensures such hens have enough room to spread their wings.*

***Statement of Purpose:***

*To ensure egg laying hens are treated humanely.*

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3636 Horsebarn Road Extension Unit 4040  
Storrs, Connecticut 06269-4040

Telephone: (860) 486-2413

Facsimile: (860) 486-4375

web: [www.AnimalScience.uconn.edu](http://www.AnimalScience.uconn.edu)

Although this bill appears to copy some of the language of the ballot initiative recently passed in California, the language of this bill is vague, in that it says that cages must be large enough so that hens may spread their wings. Current housing does not prevent birds from spreading their wings. They may touch another bird or the side of the cage in doing so, but the can spread their wings, so the bill is superfluous. The statement of purpose says actually has more meaning than the body of the bill. According to the stated purpose, the authors of the bill assume that the current use of cages for housing of egg laying hens is inhumane. I would disagree. According to the American College Dictionary, the term "inhumane" means *not humane; lacking humanity or kindness*. Humane means *characterized by tenderness and compassion for the suffering or distressed*.

I would argue that birds properly housed in laying cages are neither suffering nor distressed. Since the first battery cages were introduced for laying hens during the 20<sup>th</sup> century, their suitability for housing these hens has been debated by both scientists and non-scientists alike. The practice of housing birds in layer cages evolved over time and was generally adopted because it *improved* the overall welfare of the bird by reducing its exposure to parasites, weather, predators, and diseases transmitted from wild birds and rodents, in addition to reducing the health risks to humans through prolonged contact of the egg with manure and dirt. Cages were also introduced to reduce fighting and cannibalism, feather pecking and other maladaptive behaviors prevalent in flocks of birds. Those that would put chickens on par with humans in psychological, emotional and physiological terms argue that confinement of *any animal* not just chickens is amoral. However, much of this argument is unsubstantiated by science based research.

There has been a lot of research in the past 20 years providing data that generally shows that chickens in cages are basically very healthy and productive when managed correctly, but that obviously birds in cages do not have the same freedom of movement and to perform some behaviors as birds on range or in the wild. Dust bathing and perching are two of the main behaviors cited. Dust bathing in the wild bird is for the control of ectoparasites, such as lice and mites. These are not problems in caged layers. Perching is a way of getting off the ground, as chickens are ground nesting birds, they only fly to get away from predators and they perch in trees at night to avoid ground predators. Again, this is not a problem with caged birds. Of course, this bill is addressing spreading of wings. Birds generally only do this in preparation for flight or fight. Chickens are not a flight bird and normally only fly to get to a roost, or away from a predator, neither of which is a problem with birds housed in cage systems.

One of the advantages of caged birds is that they have fewer birds with which to establish a peck order. This means less pecking of each other and moving from group to group to find their rank in the order. This reduces the number of fights among birds in cages and the severity of attacks from other birds.

Back to the "inhumane" cage practices and distress on the birds. It has been proven that birds under stress (distressed) will have decreased egg production, decreased disease resistance and increased mortality. (See references at the end of this statement.) There is abundant research indicating that cage birds produce as well or better than their floor or range reared counterparts. Newer cages have been designed to provide more space per bird and improve their welfare. In fact the United Egg Producers have formulated guidelines for caged laying hens based on the findings of a group of poultry scientists and ethologists. In summary, their recommendations are:

1. Cage configuration should be such that manure from birds in upper cage levels does not drop directly on birds in lower level cages.
2. All hens should be able to stand comfortably upright in their cage. The slope of the cage floor should not exceed 8 degrees.
3. Space allowance should be in the range of 67 to 86 square inches of usable space per bird to optimize hen welfare.
4. Feeder space should be sufficient to allow all birds to eat at the same time.

These guidelines were based on a thorough review of the scientific literature on bird physiology, behavior, welfare, health and production. The UEP has been certifying poultry producers, through independent auditors, based on these voluntary guidelines and the major producers in Connecticut are in the UEP certification program.

Chickens are by nature social animals, and as such tend to group together, especially at night. Birds touch each other a lot. To provide a living space where birds will not touch each other is tantamount to housing birds individually in pens. This will not work since chickens are social animals and perform best when in the direct company of others of their kind.

Since the unstated aim of the bill is to ban the use of cages for laying hens, as proposed by the some representatives two years ago, I would like to address that concern. One of the arguments made by opponents of cages for laying hens is that egg production cannot be used as a determinant of wellbeing of chickens. They say this because they know that hens in cages produce more eggs than their ground reared counterparts. They try to say that production is not an accurate measure of distress in laying hens, however, the first thing to drop when the birds are distressed (due to illness, fear, temperature, lack of feed, overcrowding, etc) is egg production. This has been determined by numerous scientific studies over the past forty years. So this is a non-point in the argument.

Numerous studies have shown that decreasing space allowance in cages to below a range of 67-86 square inches per hen significantly reduces hen-housed egg production and increases mortality. Cage space will vary depending on type of cages and birds being housed. For example, space allowance can be at the low end of the range in shallow cages in which small Leghorn strains are housed, but should be at the higher end of the range in deep cages housing larger strains like Brown hens. Thus the guidelines the UEP has suggested make perfect sense.

Darre Testimony on Bill 5811 Page 4

A 1995 study showed that a density of between 6 and 8 birds per cage improved egg quality, and the birds at that stocking density produced more grade A eggs than birds housed with more birds in a cage. This shows that both space and number of birds, not just space, are considerations in welfare assessment of chickens.

I could easily provide much more information on this subject, however, I think my point has been made.

I strongly urge you to kill this bill. I am not opposed to cage-free laying hens, as there are quite a few small producers in the area trying to generate income from these birds, but that should be a choice, not a mandate from the state. It should also be based on science, not emotion.

Thank you for considering my testimony.

A few selected references supporting my comments.

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