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Intensive Confinement of Egg Laying Hens Facts & Sample Legislation

In recent decades, intensive confinement systems for “food animal” production have largely replaced family farms. Animals in such systems are crowded so tightly that they cannot even turn around or stretch their limbs. Among those animals intensively confined are laying hens who spend virtually their entire lives confined to a space no bigger than a single sheet of notebook paper. Hens confined to tiny battery cages, who will never touch the ground, produce 95% of the eggs sold in the U.S.

How are egg laying hens confined?

Egg laying hens are confined to small wire 16 inch “battery cages” that are stacked in tiers and lined up in inside huge factory warehouses that typically house from 80,000 to 100,000 hens. Four to six hens are crowded into each battery cage — so tightly that the hens are unable to even stretch their wings or legs. When hens are about two years old, and they are unable to produce the unnatural number of eggs the industry demands, they are sent to slaughter.

What are the welfare implications of battery cages?

- Cage confinement prevents hens from performing a variety of innate and strongly instinctual behaviors such as stretching their wings or nesting, which are vital to their well-being.
- Caged hens are at high risk for osteoporosis and bone fractures, severe feather loss, painful foot lesions, infections, and respiratory disease. Additionally, it is not uncommon for the head and limbs of birds to become entangled in the wire, leading to injury, starvation, dehydration and death.
- The intensive confinement and crowding inherent to battery cage systems result in high levels of stress which generate aggression between birds that can lead to cannibalism. Instead of providing these animals with more room, producers routinely sear off the ends of the hens’ beaks in a procedure shown to produce both acute and chronic pain.

Who uses these confinement methods?

Large scale agribusiness uses battery cages to confine as many birds as possible into a small area - to allow for the greatest profitability. The battery cage and intensive confinement made human labor and thousands of family egg farms obsolete within a very short period of time. Between 1955 and 2008 flock size in a typical egg factory rose from twenty thousand to as many as 100,000 birds per house. In 1967, 44% of commercial layers were in cages; by 1978, 90% were in cages. Newest statistics from USDA report that there are approximately 300 million caged hens in the US, and 95% of the eggs sold originate from those birds.

Legislative and Industry Trends:

Animal scientists and veterinarians have voiced strong opposition to battery cages in recent years. In a Nationwide 2000 Zogby America survey, 86% of those polled said confining chickens in battery cages was “unacceptable.” Since then, over 300 colleges and universities, as well as major food retailers like Whole Foods and Safeway, have agreed to eliminate their purchase of eggs from caged hens.

In November of 2008, 8 million citizens of California voted to phase out the use of battery cages, with the measure passing 63.5% to 36.5%. Internationally, the European Union has already enacted legislation to phase out these cruel systems by 2012.

What You Can Do

Please introduce legislation in your state to require that laying hens are provided with enough room to spread their limbs without touching another animal or the sides of their cage; and prohibit government procurement of eggs from caged hens.

Essential Language

Because laws vary from state to state, language should be specifically developed for your state, and Farm Sanctuary is happy to help. There are components that should be included in all comprehensive legislation on battery cages, primarily a mandate that egg-laying hens must be not be prevented from fully stretching their wings without touching the sides of their enclosure or other birds living with them.

Sample language

AN ACT Relating to confinement of animals

SECTION 1

(1) As used in this section:

- (a) "Hen" means any female domesticated chicken, turkey, duck, goose or guinea fowl kept for the purpose of egg production.
- (d) "Turning around freely" means turning in a complete circle without any impediment, and without touching any side of the enclosure.
- (c) "Person" means any individual, firm, partnership, joint venture, association, limited liability company, corporation, estate, trust, receiver, or syndicate.

(2) A person commits an offense if the person confines a hen for all or the majority of any day in a manner that prevents the animal from:

- (a) Fully extending its wings without touching the sides of its enclosure or another hen; or
- (b) Turning around freely.

(3) Exemptions: Subsection (2) of this section does not apply to an animal:

- (a) That is being transported;
- (b) In a public exhibition, a state or county fair exhibition or a similar exhibition;
- (c) During the slaughtering process;
- (d) During lawful scientific research;
- (e) During an examination, testing, individual treatment or operation for veterinary purposes

If you would like to introduce such legislation in your state, please contact us for assistance. Farm Sanctuary is happy to assist by providing language specifically drafted for your state, scientific documents, testimony, constituent support and lobbying assistance.

For more facts about ending confinement on factory farms, please visit www.factoryfarming.com.

For assistance on drafting this legislation specifically for your state please contact campaign@farmsanctuary.org or 607-583-2225 ext. 229