

10. SHORT WRITTEN (SUBMISSION)

ANIMAL WELFARE
(LAYER HENS)
CODE OF WELFARE 2002

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Petersen, Karen and Anthony Terry. SAFE Submission of Draft 10 of the Animal Welfare (Layer Hens) Code of Welfare 2002. Christchurch. SAFE, 2002.
Extract from SAFE Submission of Draft 10 of the Animal Welfare (Layer Hens) Code of Welfare 2002.

Hens dustbathe to remove lipids from their feathers and maintain their plumage. Caged hens without access to a suitable substrate for dustbathing perform vacuum dustbathing on the floor of their cage. This suggests that deprivation of the ability to dustbathe causes the hens' welfare to suffer (Widowski & Duncan, 2000).

Inability to dustbathe can cause layer hens to peck cage mates. The motivation to dustbathe is strong, even in birds raised in wire floored cages. (Council of Europe, 1995). Researcher Klaus Vestergaard suggests that feather pecking is likely in the absence of loose, earthlike materials because hens '... are more likely to come to accept feathers as dust' (Vestergaard, 1993, quoted by Davis, 1999).

Chickens are also strongly motivated to roost at night on perches and research indicates that if perching is not possible birds may experience reduced welfare (Olsson & Keeling, 2000).

Prominent animal behaviourists have also condemned caged hens. Professor Konrad Lorenz, a Nobel Prize recipient, stated that 'The worst torture to which a battery hen is exposed is the inability to retire somewhere for the laying act' (Quoted by Druce & Lymbery, 2001).

Well-known animal behaviourist Dr Desmond Morris has said that:

Anyone who has studied the social life of birds carefully will know that theirs is a subtle and complex world, where food and water are only a small part of their behavioural needs. The brain of each bird is programmed with a complicated set of drives and responses ... All these are denied the battery hens. (Quoted in Druce & Lymbery, 2001).

Common sense tells most members of the public that a severely caged bird cannot express most of its natural innate behavioural needs and that therefore its welfare is compromised (see Section 1.7 Public Opinion).

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1.5 BEHAVIOURAL STUDIES

It is SAFE's belief that the confinement of layer hens in cages is inherently cruel as it denies hens the ability to exhibit most of their natural behaviours.

The confinement of layer hens has been condemned by research scientists world-wide based on behavioural studies.

The European Commission's Scientific Veterinary Committee stated in their 1996 review of the scientific literature that:

- 'Hens have a strong preference for laying their eggs in a nest and are highly motivated to perform nesting behaviour';
- 'Hens have a strong preference for a littered floor for pecking, scratching and dust-bathing'; and
- 'Hens have a preference to perch, especially at night'. (Quoted by Druce & Lymbery, 2001)

Lack of a suitable nest site has been shown to cause particular frustration to hens.

Chickens are strongly motivated to find a nest site in the 24 hours from ovulation to laying (Temple, 1994). Duncan (2002, cited by Schwan, c2001) reports that lack of a suitable nest site causes hens to suffer from severe frustration. Motivation to search for an appropriate nesting site is high, even in barren environments where there are no cues for exploration (Freire, Appleby & Hughes, 1996). Research indicates that provision of enclosed nest boxes can reduce stress and improve welfare for caged hens (Walker & Hughes, 1998).

Caged layer hens show a high demand for litter for pecking and scratching (Hughes & Channing, 1998; Gunnarsson, et al., 2000). It is important to provide hens with litter for foraging and dustbathing. If dust-bath deprived hens are given access to materials such as wood shavings or peat 'They go in for a complete orgy of dust bathing. They do it over and over again, apparently making up for lost time' (Stamp Dawkins, 1983, cited by Druce & Lymbery, 2001). This behaviour was also observed by Widowski & Duncan during their research into hens' willingness to work for access to dustbathing substrate (2000).

Frustration of natural feeding behaviours can result in aggressive behaviours. The Council of Europe has stated that:

Domestic fowl have retained the typical feeding pattern of jungle fowl, which consists of pecking and ground scratching, followed by ingestion. Although the degree to which pecking and scratching behaviours have been retained varies among strains of hybrids, they are still present and if frustrated these behaviours may be redirected towards injury to or even cannibalism of flock-mates. (Council of Europe, 1995, Article 2).

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Despite industry claims that if caged layer hens are producing well their welfare is adequate (welfare as measured by biological fitness (Temple, 1994)), observations of the conditions birds are kept under, and of the physical appearance of caged layer hens, suggest otherwise. Many of the sheds that cage birds are kept in are dim and dirty, with dusty, smelly air. Birds rescued or purchased from New Zealand intensive egg producing layer hen farms show:

- low body weight
- excessive feather loss
- raw red patches of skin
- respiratory distress
- fractures
- muscle and joint weakness
- foot and claw damage

These physical injuries and conditions indicate an unacceptably low level of animal welfare.

1.6 SCIENTIFIC EVIDENCE OF SUFFERING

There is a considerable body of credible scientific evidence to conclude that caged birds suffer. There have been a number of reviews of the scientific literature relating to the welfare of hens in cage systems which have identified significant welfare problems, for example Appleby (1991), Appleby & Hughes (1995), Baxter (1994), Temple (1994) and the Scientific Veterinary Committee of the European Union in 1992 and 1996.

Baxter (1994) concluded that cage systems fail to adequately provide for the welfare of hens, severely restrict the hens' ability to perform most of their normal behaviours, and that caged hens experience chronic and acute suffering.

The Scientific Veterinary Committee (1996) concluded in their review that:

Battery cage systems provide a barren environment for the birds ... It is clear that because of its small size and its barrenness, the battery cage as used at present has inherent severe disadvantages for the welfare of hens. (Quoted by Druce & LyMBERG, 2001).

The reviews showed that caged birds can suffer from a range of serious welfare problems including: feather loss; stress; cannibalism; Caged Layer Osteoporosis; Fatty Liver Haemorrhagic Syndrome (FLHS); foot and claw damage. Welfare is also reduced due to injuries from equipment, cruel practices such as forced moulting, and routine mutilations such as beak trimming.