



CRACKING
OPEN

CANADA'S
LAYING HEN
HOUSING
DEBATE

CHAPBOOK *edition 04.*



No cluckin' way!

THERE'S
MORE
TO HEN
HOUSING
THAN

SPACE

EVERY
CARTON
OF EGGS
IS PART
OF A BIGGER
STORY.

Free-range,
free-run,
and enriched
housing all
have their
proponents.

Most of
them are
arguing
for the
same thing:
hen welfare.

But from
there,
perspectives
start to
diverge.

Farmers
weigh welfare
against what
a barn can
deliver, and
what it costs
to change one.
Consumers
weigh it
against price,
and often
buy against
their own
stated values.
Regulators
weigh it
against what
the science can
prove, which
shifts as the
research does.

Animal welfare
groups argue
some systems
don't go far
enough no
matter what
the label says.
Everyone
claims the
hen's best
interest.

They just don't
necessarily
agree on what
it looks like.

So, what's
dividing
industry,
farmers,
consumers,
and animal
welfare
organizations
when it comes
to choosing
where the
hens that
lay our eggs
should live?

By the
end of this
chapbook,
you'll have
enough
context to
answer that
for yourself,
and enough
to read an
egg carton
for what it's
telling you.



WHAT'S

In 2017, Canada announced conventional battery cage housing systems for egg-laying hens would be completely phased out by 2036.



Every commercial egg farmer in the country must transition to a housing system that meets Canada's updated National Farm Animal Care Council (NFACC) Code of Practice regulations.

HAPPENING?

enriched
cages

multi-
tier free-
run

(AVIARY)

single-tier
free-run
cages

(FLOOR HOUSING)

free-
range

OPTIONS

Straightforward enough, except a significant group say stopping at conventional battery cages isn't sufficient. They want enriched cages banned too.

THE CRUX OF THE CONTROVERSY.

The industry is brooding over which welfare elements deserve priority and how each housing system contributes to good hen welfare.

THE HOUSING LINEUP.

THE ONE BEING PHASED OUT.



BATTERY CAGE.

- Severely restricts movement.
- The environment is bare.
- They use highly automated egg and manure collection which support excellent hygiene and disease control.
- They prevent almost all natural hen behaviour.



THE IN-BETWEEN.



ENRICHED CAGE.

- These are furnished cages with a small nesting area, a perch, a scratch pad.
- Groups are slightly larger and hens have a bit more room.
- Automation and disease control stays mostly intact.
- Welfare advocates liken it to lipstick on a cage.
- Veterinarians and some researchers consider it a marked improvement.



THE OPEN BARN.



FREE RUN.

- No cages.
- Hens roam a barn floor with access to perches, nesting boxes, and litter for scratching.
- Houses large flocks.
- Some things are still automated, some are not.
- Hens can move around and express natural behaviours, though managing a large flock in shared space introduces new welfare challenges.

THE BARN WITH A BACKYARD.



FREE RANGE.

- Free-run, but with outdoor access.
- Hens can go inside or outside and scratch in the dirt.
- This housing type is also the hardest to manage consistently, since weather, predators, and wild birds pose threats to welfare.

housing

alone

Welfare outcomes are nuanced. What this

doesn't

means is the switch from caged to cage-

determine

free does not necessarily translate to an

welfare.

improvement to all aspects of hen welfare.

NO SYSTEM IS PERFECT.

They all have trade-offs for hen welfare. Different hens have different responses. There's no uniform response to environments across hen breeds.

NATURE VS NURTURE. How a hen is raised influences their ability to navigate a housing system as an adult.

MANAGEMENT MATTERS. The housing system AND the farm's management practices contribute to welfare outcomes in the barn.



why?

HEALTH + BEHAVIOUR + ENVIRONMENT = OVERALL HEN WELFARE

Housing type sets the conditions, but farmer management determines a lot of what happens inside.

Welfare outcomes largely come down to two competing factors:



the

bottom

line

Battery cages maximize the first. Free-range systems maximize the second. Every other housing type sits somewhere on that spectrum, trading off one for the other.

what
a hen
wants



Management of air quality and contact with disease sources (think litter, soil, manure, wild birds, rodents, insects, and parasites).

Access to exercise space and well-balanced nutrition limits non-infectious health risks like diabetes & osteoporosis.

Another trade-off: Opportunity for freedom of movement and positive hen behaviour expressions make it difficult to prevent harmful hen behaviours like injurious feather pecking or smothering.

good
health

stronger
body

freedom
of
expression

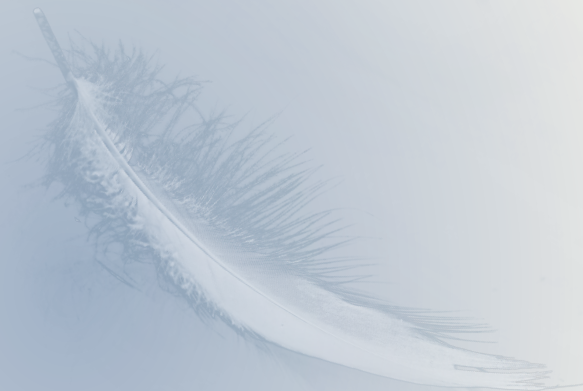
smothering:

An unpredictable behaviour triggered by environmental factors that lead to a mass pile up of hens, which may result in suffocation.

Farmers must watch out for broken bones, feather damage, and infections. These vary depending on housing, hygiene, and flock management.

flap

flap



flap

space to:

How much *space* does a hen need to thrive?

In a battery cage, each hen gets an area the size of a sheet of paper.

Research says space allowances of *at least 599cm² per hen* create pockets big enough to let each hen flap its wings and perform other comfort behaviours.

1913cm²

Area needed
to *flap wings*

750cm²

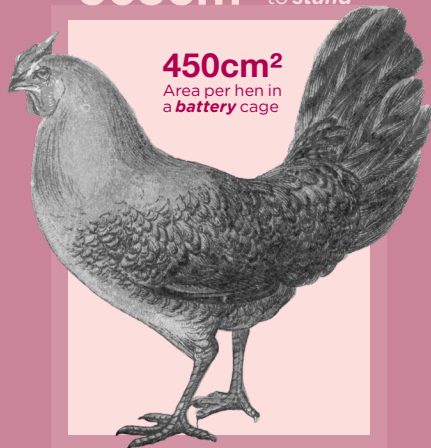
Area per hen in
an *enriched* cage

~563cm²

Area needed
to *stand*

450cm²

Area per hen in
a *battery* cage



929cm²

Area per hen in *mixed*
flooring cage-free system

~1316cm²

Area needed
to *turn*

~1900cm²

Area per hen in *litter*
only cage-free system

tok-tok (Dutch)
git-git (Azerbaijani)
cot-cot

Mudds'
reply:

"Mortality was considerably higher in the cage-free aviary system, so why is this deemed the gold standard? I don't understand how it is OK to accept more animals dying just to have them in more aesthetically pleasing surroundings."

--- Kirsty Mudds, editor,
The Poultry Magazine (2016)

Welfare
discussions
in action

"Eggs produced in enriched cages won't satisfy retailer requirements for cage-free eggs... It is regrettable that egg farmers still promote cages for laying hens. **Whatever the alternative caging is called - 'furnished', 'enriched' or 'colony' - it remains an unacceptable confinement system.**"

--- Stephanie Brown,
director, Canadian
Coalition for Farm Animals
& Liz White, director,
Animal Alliance of Canada
in a letter to the editor
of The Poultry Magazine
Kirsty Mudds.

codet (French)
gok-gok (Danish)
kokodak (Slovenian)
bock
-pock (German)

● Laying hens have clear behavioural needs that no single housing system fully meets, and bigger spaces that allow natural behaviour also introduce new risks from larger flocks.

WHO

National Farm Animal Care

- * NFACC SETS CANADA'S HEN WELFARE STANDARDS THROUGH A MULTI-STAKEHOLDER CODE OF PRACTICE THAT PHASES OUT BATTERY CAGES WHILE ACCEPTING BOTH ENRICHED AND CAGE-FREE SYSTEMS.

Canadian commercial egg farmers

- * SUPPORT TRANSITIONING AWAY FROM BATTERY CAGES BUT WORRY ABOUT LEARNING CURVES, PRODUCTIVITY LOSSES, AND INVESTING IN ENRICHED CAGES THAT REGULATORS MAY LATER BAN ANYWAY.

Canadian consumers

- * MOST PREFER CAGE-FREE EGGS IN PRINCIPLE BUT CHOOSE CHEAPER CAGED EGGS AT THE STORE, WITH PRICE OUTWEIGHING WELFARE AT CHECKOUT.

Poultry system manufacturers

- * SUPPORT THE SHIFT AWAY FROM BATTERY CAGES AND INVEST IN BOTH ENRICHED AND CAGE-FREE SYSTEMS, THOUGH MANY QUIETLY FAVOUR ENRICHED CAGES AS THE MORE WELFARE-SOUND OPTION.

Producer associations

- * EGG FARMERS OF CANADA MANAGES THE NATIONAL TRANSITION AWAY FROM BATTERY CAGES, BALANCING HEN WELFARE STANDARDS AGAINST FARMER ECONOMICS AND STABLE EGG SUPPLY FOR CONSUMERS.

Retail Council of Canada

- * DROPPED ITS 2025 CAGE-FREE DEADLINE IN 2021, DEFERRING TO NFACC STANDARDS AND LEAVING INDIVIDUAL GROCERS TO DECIDE THEIR OWN SOURCING TIMELINES.

Restaurant chains

- * MANY PLEDGED TO BE CAGE-FREE BY 2025 BUT STRUGGLED WITH SUPPLIER AVAILABILITY, WITH MCDONALD'S AND A&W DELIVERING WHILE OTHERS QUIETLY PUSHED DEADLINES BACK.

Veterinarians

- * OPPOSE BATTERY CAGES BUT CONSIDER ENRICHED CAGES A LEGITIMATE WELFARE OPTION, CAUTIONING THAT CAGE-FREE SYSTEMS INTRODUCE HEALTH RISKS REQUIRING CAREFUL MANAGEMENT.

THE

Academics

- * WARN EXCLUDING ENRICHED CAGES MAY HARM WELFARE, SINCE RESEARCH TO IDENTIFY THE BEST METHODS TO MITIGATE HARMFUL FLOCK BEHAVIOURS IN CAGE-FREE SYSTEMS IS ONGOING.

Animal welfare advocates

- * OPPOSE ALL CAGES, VIEWING ENRICHED CAGES AS AN INDUSTRY WORKAROUND THAT LETS HEN SUFFERING CONTINUE UNDER A DIFFERENT NAME.

TABLE?

WHO'S PAYING



FOR THIS?

Transitioning an entire sector of the food industry is not solely based on animal welfare, it spills over into the economy, environment, and throughout societal narratives.

farmers pay for...

Cost of new infrastructure.

Increased operating costs from higher labour needs, increased feed consumption, and lower stocking densities (= less eggs produced).

Learning to manage a new system.

\$\$\$\$\$\$\$\$\$

consumers pay for...

Changes to affordability of egg products: Caged systems cost less to operate → these eggs are more affordable.



environmental costs fall on...

Air quality: In alternative housing systems → presence of litter + less automated manure management = increased ammonia & dust in the air in the barn.

Nearby water bodies: Nutrients found in manure can cause eutrophication – in other words, increased nutrients in water causes excessive plant or algal growth destabilizing the aquatic ecosystem – and acidification of water if allowed to leach away from storage facilities.



“CAGE”

what do you picture when you hear it?

Marketing knows. That's why you see “cage-free,” “free-run,” “free-range,” “pasture raised,” and “free-roaming” all on the same shelf. Each term signals something slightly different, and none of them are regulated quite as tightly as they sound.

Understanding what the labels mean gives you more control over the choice you are making at the store and whether the price premium is worth it.

society pays for...

Confusion around food decisions & susceptibility to marketing influences.

???

beyond welfare

Why do cage-free eggs cost more?

Less automation, more labour. Cage-free hens also eat more feed, since moving around takes energy that caged hens don't spend. Higher feed cost + higher labour cost = higher price at the till.

Is NFACC's code of practice the law?

No. It's a guideline, built by consensus, and used to inform policy and industry audits. It isn't legally binding on its own.

Why did battery cages become so prevalent in the first place?

Their sloped floors that roll eggs to the front for ease of collection and the manure belts that operate underneath the cages to carry droppings away from the birds.

What housing system produces an organic egg?

Free-range. That means outdoor access for at least six hours a day, with a barn that's either single-tier or multi-tier free-run.

economics, environment, & society

What protects a hen legally?

1 **FEDERALLY,** the Criminal Code bans wilful neglect or cruelty to any animal. Police, provincial SPCAs, and agriculture ministries enforce it.

2 **PROVINCIALY,** each province runs its own act. In Alberta, for example, that's the Animal Protection Act, enforced by police.

3 **INDUSTRY-SPECIFIC, NOT LEGALLY BINDING:** Egg Farmers of Canada's Animal Care Program. Participation has been mandatory since 2023. EFC runs inspections and audits, and can fine a farm or revoke its licence. Farms that pass, along with a food safety check called "Start Clean, Stay Clean", can put the Egg Quality Assurance seal on the carton.

the timeline

1930-1940
Battery cages introduced to improve hygiene and scale up egg production.

1970-1980
Animal rights movements in Europe and North America begin targeting intensive livestock systems.

1999
The EU sets minimum standards for laying hens and begins phasing out battery cages, with full phase-out by 2012.

2014
Alberta stops permitting installation of new battery cages.

2025
A&W Canada reaches 100% cage-free. Mercy for Animals releases a report grading major Canadian retailers on their cage-free transition progress.

2024
McDonald's Canada reaches 100% cage-free.

2016
Egg Farmers of Canada announces full battery cage phase-out by 2036. The Retail Council of Canada pledges cage-free eggs for all member retailers by 2025. A&W Canada transitions to enriched cages and starts funding cage-free research.

2017
NFACC releases the updated Code of Practice for laying hens and pullets.

2021
Retail Council of Canada walks back its cage-free pledge, aligning instead with NFACC standards.

2023
Restaurant Brands International pushes cage-free pledge from 2025 to 2030.

2022
NFACC completes its 5-year review of the 2017 Code of Practice.

2036
All commercial laying hens in Canada must be housed in systems that support natural nesting, perching, and foraging behaviours.

THE SIMPSON CENTRE.



THOUGHT
FOR
FOOD.

CONTENT
RESEARCH
Althea
Brolsma &
Casey Wong

CONTENT
SUPERVISION
BY
Juhi Huda
& Roshanne
Sihota

PROJECT
COORDINATION
BY Roshanne
Sihota

SCAN TO
VIEW OUR
SOURCES



CHAPBOOK
CONTENT BY
Emma Ohirko
AND DESIGNED
BY 8then

...hey, we have a hen
in our name, can we
just do it like this?

