

Submission by Sentient, The Veterinary Institute for Animal Ethics:

Free Range Egg Labelling Consultation Paper

Sentient welcomes the opportunity to comment on the Australian Government's proposed options to increase consumer certainty about egg labelling. Our comments are informed by a commitment to transparency in labelling, with labels that are clearly linked to animal welfare standards, which allows consumers the confidence to know they can choose products ethically. We have long advocated for the need for a national standard for egg labelling that covers eggs produced on free range systems, and also caged and barn systems. Without a legal definition of the term 'free range', historically we have seen egg producers engaging in misleading and deceptive conduct by marketing eggs as 'free range' or 'free to roam' when, in fact, most hens have not been afforded outdoor access or the opportunity to engage in natural behaviours.

Response to key focus questions

5. An information standard for eggs labelled 'free range' could mandate that the eggs come from flocks in which *most hens go outside on most ordinary days*. Would this reduce the problem?

Yes, providing there are clear guidelines for producers about how to encourage use of the outdoor range by hens, and providing their use of the range is monitored daily and also independently audited.

6. Do 'free range' egg producers want detailed guidance on production factors that reliably lead to compliance with the requirement that *most hens go outside on most ordinary days*?

We believe detailed guidance is required to ensure compliance with the above definition of 'free range'. For example, as noted in the discussion paper (p. 48), attention is required to farming conditions that affect whether hens use the outside range. These include the conditions of the internal areas the hens are housed in; the time of day and how regularly the openings are opened; the size and condition of the outdoor area, including any shaded areas, the presence of food, water and different vegetation and ground conditions; the stocking density of any outdoor area; and whether the hens have been trained or conditioned to remain indoors¹.

7. Any detailed guidance on 'free range' egg production factors would need to be developed in consultation with industry. . If this guidance is desired, should it be:
- included as a 'defence' as part of an information standard?
 - published by the Australian Competition and Consumer Commission (ACCC) as clear guidance about the current law?

¹ www.accc.gov.au/media-release/federal-court-orders-300000-penalty-after-finding-free-range-egg-claims-to-be-misleading



- c) delayed until after the review of the 'Model Code of Practice for the Welfare of Animals — Domestic Poultry' has been completed?

This guidance should be published by the Australian Competition and Consumer Commission (ACCC) as clear guidance about the current law. This will allow the ACCC to exercise its enforcement efforts. We do not approve the use of a 'defence' as part of an information standard, or of Model Codes of Practice for the Welfare of Animals, because neither of these is mandatory, yet if complied with, both can be used by producers as a defence against cruelty claims.

8. Should an information standard require prominent disclosure on 'free range' egg cartons of the indoor or outdoor stocking density of hens, or any other practices?

Sentient strongly supports the disclosure on 'free range' egg cartons of indoor and outdoor stocking densities, with a visual indicator of what this means, and also indications of 'no de-beaking' and 'no forced moulting'.

9. Should an information standard require prominent disclosure of production methods for all hen eggs:

- a) as either 'free range', 'barn' or 'cage' eggs?
b) including optional categories such as 'access to range' and 'premium free range'

We support prominent disclosure of production methods for all hen eggs as either 'free range', 'barn' or 'cage' eggs. In our view, the terms 'access to range' and 'premium free range' are confusing and should not be included. 'Access to range' implies birds are free range when there may be only a small opening to the outside which few birds use. 'Premium free range' would not be necessary if free range standards are adequately defined in accordance with high welfare standards.

Policy options

- Sentient supports Option 3, an information standard for all categories of eggs ('free range', 'barn' and 'cage' eggs), but this should include additional animal welfare conditions such as a prohibition on beak trimming and induced moulting. We do not support the variations of this option: Option 3a ('premium free range eggs') should not be necessary if the standard free range option includes other welfare conditions, and Option 3b ('access to range') is potentially deceptive and would benefit producers who label their eggs as free range but are unwilling to make 'costly production changes'.
- We believe the definition of 'free range' eggs as being produced by systems where 'most hens go outside on most ordinary days' is inadequate without including maximum stocking densities, details of the indoor and outside ranges and other welfare considerations. The details of both indoor and outdoor ranges are crucial for ensuring ranging behaviour by hens and are as important to their welfare as stocking density and space allowances.
- Sentient supports lower stocking densities and smaller flock sizes as these both increase ranging behaviour due to the ability of hens to access pop holes more easily.² We advocate for a maximum outside stocking density of 1,500 birds per hectare, or 2,500 birds per hectare on pasture-rotation systems, and a maximum indoor stocking density of 7 birds per square metre of the usable area for floor-based systems, or 9 birds per square metre of the usable area for tiered systems. Stocking densities should permit appropriate social interactions,

² Gilani, A.M. et al, 2014, Factors affecting ranging behaviour in young and adult laying hens. *British Poultry Science* 55(2): 127-135.



including the ability for hens to escape bullying, and to allow sufficient individual space for hens to engage in natural behaviours, which are essential to their physical and mental well-being.

- We also support small to medium flock sizes. There is evidence that laying hens from small (2-2,500) and medium (5-6,000) flock sizes use the outdoor range and engage in foraging behaviour more frequently and for longer than birds from large flocks (over 9,000 birds).³
- Furthermore, producers must establish and maintain the following conditions to encourage hens to use the outdoor range, to facilitate natural behaviours (such as dust bathing, perching, foraging, exercising, exploring and engaging in comfort behaviours such as stretching and preening) and to reduce stress levels and the risk of feather-pecking:

Outdoor range

- Provision of dense, overhead cover on the range, such as trees or hedges, to provide shade and protection from aerial predators⁴
- A diversity of plant species, which promotes foraging and harvesting of seeds, and maintenance of the run with green plants to avoid hygienic deterioration such as muddy areas⁵
- Artificial structures to provide stimulation for natural behaviours (eg., covered dustbaths for dustbathing or berries for foraging), shade and protection from winds or predators⁶
- Regular rotation of the outdoor area to reduce parasite burden and maintain the attractiveness of the area to hens
- Protection from predation by foxes or other animals that may enter the range, such as through the use of electric fencing or trained guardian animals
- Regular exposure to outdoor enclosures in the rearing environment between 12 and 20 weeks of age⁷
- Genetic selection of hens adapted to systems with outdoor ranges, which reduces feather pecking⁸

Indoors (barn or shed)

- Multiple small houses with free range access, or the use of partitions in larger houses, because this allows them to establish small, stable social groups and also allows ample space⁹

³ Gebhardt-Henrich S.G. et al, 2014. Use of outdoor ranges by laying hens in different sized flocks. *Applied Animal Behaviour Science* 155: 74-81.)

⁴ Gilani, A.M. et al, 2014, Factors affecting ranging behaviour in young and adult laying hens. *British Poultry Science* 55(2): 127-135; Nicol, C.J. et al, 2003, Matched concurrent case-control study of risk factors for feather pecking in hens on free-range commercial farms in the UK. *British Poultry Science* 44: 515-523.

⁵ Knierim, U., 2006, Animal welfare aspects of outdoor runs for laying hens: A review. *NJAS*, 54-2

⁶ Knierim, U., 2006, Animal welfare aspects of outdoor runs for laying hens: A review. *NJAS*, 54-2

⁷ Grigor, P.N. et al, 1995, Effects of regular handling and exposure to an outside area on subsequent fearfulness and dispersal in domestic hens. *Applied Animal Behaviour Science* 44: 47-55

⁸ Sorensen P, 2001, Breeding strategies for poultry in genetic adaptation to the organic environment. In M. Hovi and T. Baars (Eds), *Breeding and Feeding for Animal Health and Welfare in Organic Livestock Systems*. Proceedings of the 4th NAHWOA Workshop, 24-27 March 2001, Wageningen, University of Reading, Reading, pp. 51-61



- Secluded nest boxes for egg laying, with a minimum of 1 per 7 hens
- Perches for roosting, which must include aerial perches to decrease aggressive behaviour and feather pecking¹⁰
- Provision of a high quality, deep dustbath with dry, friable material to allow foraging¹¹
- Lower light intensity within the shed, due to the lower change in light intensity from inside to outdoors, which encourages ranging behaviour¹²
- Increasing availability of pop holes (openings from the shed to the outside range), which reduces the distance for hens to travel to the nearest hole¹³

Other welfare considerations

- The use of forced moulting (the denial of food or water for significant periods to extend the laying cycle) must not be allowed. Hens must have access to food at least once every 12 hours and preferably ad libitum. 'Skip-a-day' feeding is not an acceptable industry practice for maintaining bird health and productivity.
- The use of de-beaking must not be allowed. Feather pecking is a welfare problem that occurs in laying hens in both non-cage and cage systems. Sentient opposes beak trimming as a strategy to prevent feather pecking. This problem can be addressed by genetic selection and the provision of opportunities for enrichment by foraging, dust bathing and perching. It can also be prevented by lower stocking densities, which allow birds to move away from pecking animals and by reducing stress in general. Strategies to reduce feather pecking include rearing and transfer to the layer farm, litter quality and use, diet, range quality and use, perching and other environmental enrichment, and flock health.¹⁴

Additional comments

- An alarming limitation of the consultation paper is its consideration of the labelling issue separately from animal welfare standards; this is inconsistent with the pattern of increasing demand by consumers for free range eggs being driven by a regard for animal welfare. Definitions should be based on evidence from animal welfare science, not only on consumer preferences or the convenience of industry bodies.
- We question why this consultation process does not include the option of an outright ban on caged eggs, which would bring Australia in line with the EU. Sentient is fundamentally opposed to the housing of hens in conventional battery, and newer enriched, cage production systems. These systems pose inherent welfare adversities to all birds due to the severe

⁹ Pickett, H., 2007, Alternatives to the barren battery cage for the housing of laying hens in the European Union. A report by Compassion in World Farming

¹⁰ Donaldson, C.J. and O'Connell, N.E., 2012, The influence of access to aerial perches on fearfulness, social behaviour and production parameters in free-range laying hens. *Applied Animal Behaviour Science*, 142: 51-60

¹¹ Van Liere, D.W. 1992, The significance of fowls bathing in dust. *Animal Welfare* 1: 187-202

¹² Gilani, A.M. et al, 2014, Factors affecting ranging behaviour in young and adult laying hens. *British Poultry Science* 55(2): 127-135

¹³ Gilani, A.M. et al, 2014, Factors affecting ranging behaviour in young and adult laying hens. *British Poultry Science* 55(2): 127-135

¹⁴ Lambton S.L. et al 2013, A bespoke management package can reduce levels of injurious pecking in loose-housed laying hen flocks. *Veterinary Record* 172 (16): 423.



movement and behavioural restrictions, which far outweigh any advantages in hygiene or management. Furthermore, there is evidence that the chance of mortality outbreaks is no greater in alternative versus conventional cage systems¹⁵.

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¹⁵ Freire, R., and Cowling, A. 2013, The welfare of laying hens in conventional cages and alternative systems: first steps towards a quantitative comparison, *Animal Welfare* 22: 57-65

