

Cage-Free Hens Study Finds Little Difference in Egg Quality (DJ)

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Mar. 18 - Egg-laying hens raised cage-free exhibit a wider range of natural behaviors than more-confined birds, but cage-free facilities have higher hen-mortality rates and lower air quality, according to food-industry-backed research published Wednesday.

Cage-free hens can perch, nest and forage more than chickens reared in the two other major U.S. commercial hen-housing systems, both of which use cages, the study found. Birds occupying large cages show more diverse behaviors than those in the small cages that dominate the egg industry.

The study found little difference in egg quality among the three systems, and no indication that hens in any of them experienced acute or chronic stress.

The study comes as the food industry faces broad pressure from animal-welfare advocates to improve the living conditions of livestock and as egg farmers try to respond to new state laws and food-company policies requiring more space for chickens.

The research was conducted by the Coalition for Sustainable Egg Supply, a group of animal-health scientists, egg suppliers and major food companies such as McDonald's Corp. and Sysco Corp. The study, some of which is being published in peer-reviewed scientific journals, is the culmination of a multi-year examination of three hen houses on a Midwestern farm.

Even before its publication, the study drew skepticism from animal-rights advocates because of its backing by industry.

"This report from industry actors should be seen for what it is--a stacked deck designed to maintain the caging of hens, and not the kind of thing one would expect of a sector that's looking ahead and seeking to align its housing practices with public concerns about animal well-being," Wayne Pacelle, chief executive of the Humane Society of the United States, wrote in a blog post earlier this month. The society, which has pushed for new state hen-housing laws, said it was concerned the conclusions would be biased in favor of caged systems.

Still, the study is likely to be influential, and the coalition said it plans to present the results to egg producers, retailers and restaurants to give them "the information they need to make independent, informed decisions" about hen housing.

The vast majority of the U.S.'s 305 million egg-laying hens are confined to cages that typically give them 67 square inches of space each--smaller than a standard sheet of paper. But California in January began requiring every shell egg sold in the state to come from hens that have room to lie down, turn around and extend their wings. Several other states have similar laws taking effect in coming years, and companies including Starbucks Corp. and Burger King have unveiled plans to stop using eggs

from caged birds.

The coalition's study, begun in 2010, compared a cage-free barn with one with traditional cages and one with larger, "colony" cages, which include perches and nesting boxes. It was intended to be more comprehensive than previous hen-housing studies. Scientists from Michigan State University, the University of California, Davis and elsewhere--using hundreds of cameras mounted in the facilities--collected data to measure each system's effect on animal behavior, egg safety, air quality, production costs and worker health.

Researchers found the cage-free system-known as an aviary-cost 36% more to operate than the small-cage system. Costs for the large cages were 13% higher than the small cages.

Mortality rates in the cage-free system were double those of the other systems, due in part to hens cannibalizing each other or excessive pecking. The hens' beaks were trimmed, "but they still were able to inflict damage on each other," said Joy Mench, co-lead researcher on the study and an animal-science professor at UC Davis.

On the other hand, cage-free hens had the strongest leg and wing bones-diminishing the potential for breakage-while small-cage hens had the weakest.

Indoor air quality was worst in the cage-free system, the study showed. In such systems, hens stir up dust while walking on the floor, which contains some of the birds' manure, elevating ammonia levels.



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