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Battery egg hens still face hell as 'enriched' cages phased in

Justin Kerswell

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In 2012 battery cages are due to be replaced by 'enriched' cages, designed to improve bird welfare. But footage from existing 'enriched' cage egg farms reveals intensive production

cruelty and suffering, says Justin Kerswell

The battery cage has been a byword for cruelty for decades. Hens crammed into cages with so little room they can never spread their wings, the birds are condemned to a short life of extreme confinement, mutilation (debeaking) and even cannibalism.

However, despite being hidden from view, the horrors of the battery cage system have perhaps provoked more debate than any other form of factory farming. Indeed, as long ago as 1999 the Council of the European Union judged that battery cages are so cruel they should be banned across the EU. However, we are only now, after all this time, on the verge of banning them in the UK.

Come 2012, battery cages are supposed to be replaced across Europe by – yes, you guessed it – another cage. Optimistically

described as 'enriched,' hens are still packed into wire prisons – albeit prisons with a little more space. To be exact, it is around a postcard sized extra space per bird; still considerably less than needed for them to fully extend their wings.

As there will only be one nest box and very limited perching and dust bathing areas in each cage, the hens will be forced to compete for access to these sites. Dominant hens may prevent others from ever accessing these facilities.

Most birds in 'enriched' cages will still spend a significant proportion of their time standing on sloping wire mesh floors with little room to move around, and they will all still be denied fresh air and sunshine. One scientific report suggests that cannibalism in some 'enriched' cages could still run as high as 1 in every 30 birds. 'Enriched' or not, there is no escaping the fact that we are still talking about a cage.

Despite British producers being on target for 100 per cent compliance by 2012, it is believed that around one third of EU production will still not have swapped to the 'enriched' system – despite 12 years to prepare to do so. It is currently unclear what the consequences of this will be. Despite calls from politicians and producers to ban the importation of eggs that do not meet these requirements, free trade rules may prevent this. The infamously cruel production of foie-gras is banned in the UK but its sale is not. That is just one example of trade rules that make a mockery of existing sovereign welfare requirements.

However, the tub thumping by British egg producers that they will be disadvantaged by this inequality hides the fact that Britain does not actually lead in welfare for egg laying hens. As the industry prepares to embrace the 'enriched' cage, other countries have already banned it, or have set wheels in motion to do so.

Austria banned the battery cage (doing so in 2009) and is set to ban the 'enriched' cage by 2020. Belgium has also banned the battery cage – and proposes to ban 'enriched' cages by 2024. Sweden, Germany, Luxembourg and the Netherlands have already banned the battery cage ahead of 2012. Germany has introduced a 'family cage', which has more space than the 'enriched' cage used in other countries. However, consumers in Germany have been rejecting these eggs. Outside the EU, Switzerland has already banned both the battery and 'enriched' cage systems.

Undercover filming

Some British companies have already made the switch to 'enriched' cages ahead of 2012. One of these is Noble Foods. They produce around 60 million eggs a week and boast a £2bn turnover. In July last year, Viva! secretly filmed at a Noble Foods establishment (see video above) – probably the largest 'enriched' cage unit in Britain. One visit ahead alone holds around 125,000

Battery egg hens still face hell as 'enriched' cages phased in - Comment - The Ecologist
 establishment (see video above) - probably the largest enriched cage unit in Britain. One vast shed alone holds around 125,000 hens.

The footage shows cages that stretch almost as far as the eye can see; climbing upwards in tier after tier, with multiple gangways running between the stacks of cages. A dystopian, futuristic landscape designed with profit in mind.

Fifty per cent of hens in Britain are still caged and despite supposedly higher welfare cages, some of the birds we saw were debeaked, as are most hens. The tips of beaks are rich in nerve endings and these are the parts that are sliced off - an often painful process that can lead to inactivity and loss of appetite.

This mutilation was supposed to be banned earlier this year but the Government has now delayed it until at least 2016. Debeaking denies birds the ability to damage each other when the frustration of their lives results in aggression.

Over the past 20 years, the public have shown their outrage at the continued use of battery cages by a mass move over to free range eggs. However, it is a sad irony that increased demand has meant that the free-range industry itself is now highly intensive

Another investigation by Viva! and Sky News into [the Noble Foods' owned Happy Egg Company](#) found thousands of hens housed in sheds, poorly maintained environmental enrichment and even, in one case, the use of electric wires to shock the birds.

On a sliding scale of misery - and as misleading as the term free-range often is - it is at least a step up from the battery cage. A concern is that some consumers and retailers may believe the 'enriched' cage hype and drop free-range eggs. Indeed, many consumers who would balk at buying battery whole eggs are seemingly unaware that those eggs are in many processed foods they buy. These will be replaced by 'enriched' ones.

Still, what of the hen? Scant improvements do nothing to address the remaining - and considerable - welfare issues that face the modern egg industry. From [routine mutilations to the killing of around 30 million male chicks](#) in Britain each year (the wrong sex lay and too skinny for meat). Then there's the hen herself, routinely killed at 72 weeks as soon as her egg production dips. Sadly many of these problems exist in all types of egg production: from the most intensive to the most extensive.

The bottom line is that modern egg production is hell for hens.

Justin Kerswell is Campaigns Manager at [Viva!](#), Europe's largest vegetarian and vegan campaigning organisation

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Posted By CornwallJo1 September 8, 2011 05:03:53 PM

I write about ex-batts, battery farming, intensive farming and try to highlight the plight of the battery hen. My blog <http://lfewiththeexbatts.wordpress.com/> talks about ex-batts. Please please please only ever buy free range or better still, rehome your own ex-batts!

Re: Battery egg hens still face hell as 'enriched' cages phased in

Posted By onkyoudcmlr1 September 23, 2011 12:04:40 AM

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