

Fight over caged chickens

WHAT'S IN A LABEL

Supermarket eggs now come in a half-dozen or more varieties. A guide to the labels:

Terms defined by the U.S. Department of Agriculture. "Organic" eggs are certified by a third party:

- **No hormones** – By law, chickens cannot be treated with hormones, so this label is effectively meaningless.
- **No hormones: Natural** – Means only that the eggs are raw and don't have artificial flavors or colors added.
- **No hormones: No antibiotics** – Chickens are not treated with antibiotics.
- **No hormones: Organic** – Chickens must be raised without cages and on only organic feed, with no antibiotics. They must also have some access to the outside.

Other labels reviewed by USDA on a case-by-case basis:

- **Cage-free** – Chickens are not kept in cages, and should have access to a nest box for laying, a place to scratch in the dirt, and a perch.
- **Omega-3** – Chickens are fed a special diet that raises the levels of certain fatty acids in the eggs. The label doesn't imply anything about how the chickens are housed.
- **Free range or free roaming** – Meets the cage-free standards, plus provides some access to the outdoors. The USDA regulates this label for poultry, but not for eggs.
- **Vegetarian diet** – Feed does not include animal protein, a common supplement.



Nick Ut/Associated Press

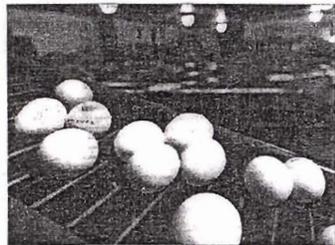
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Brown vs. white eggs:

- Brown hens lay brown eggs, white hens lay white eggs.
- In the United States, white chickens are generally of the leghorn breed, originally from Livorno, Italy.
- Farmers raise several different major brown varieties. Leghorns are favored for caged operations, brown breeds for cage-free.
- If brown eggs taste different from white eggs, that's a consequence of what their mother was fed and how she was treated, not the color of the shell.

Sources: U.S. Department of Agriculture; United Egg Producers

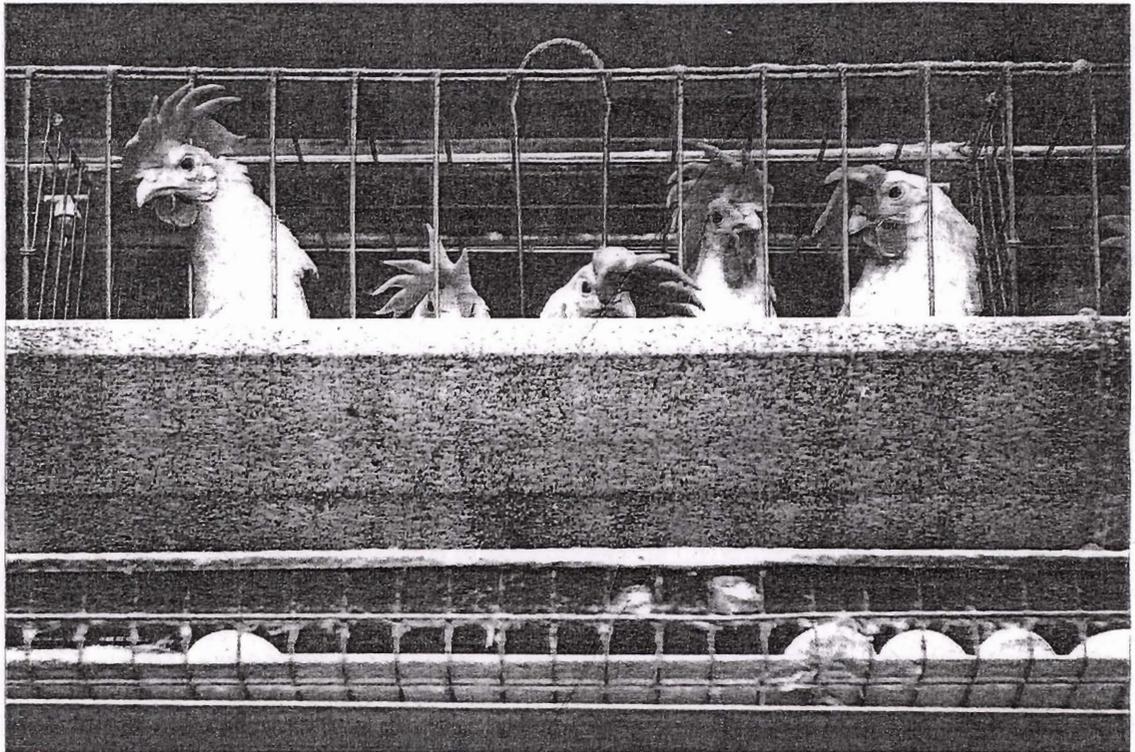


Eggs in Livingston ride a conveyor to be washed and inspected. In Sacramento, eggs from caged hens sold in stores at up to \$1.99 a dozen, while cage-free eggs went as high as \$3.99.

INSIDE

Compare a caged henhouse with a cage-free one.

▶ Page D2



Poultry farmers counter the Humane Society's ballot drive to phase out traditional farm method.

By Jim Downing
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LIVINGSTON – What do chickens want?

Not so much, really: room for a dust bath, a place to perch, a nest. Absent those three basics – the nest especially – chickens get stressed, animal behavior experts say.

But most egg-laying chickens live without any of those things, in bare cages like the ones stacked four rows high in the J.S. West and Cos. barn in Merced County.

Nearly 150,000 white chickens pace and murmur here, eight birds in each 4-square-foot wire box. A fine dust sticks in the throat. It's 10:30 a.m. and the egg counter on the wall already has topped 59,000.

The Humane Society of the United States says caged chickens suffer – and it's gathering signatures to put a measure on the November 2008 ballot that would make California the first state to ban barns outfitted like this one.

"You don't need to be a scientist to know that confining a bird to a space



Caged chickens, above, are part of a 150,000-hen operation in Livingston, where Veronica Perez, left, removes a cracked egg from a conveyor. As Europe phases out caged production, studies have found a higher death and injury rate for unpenned birds as they mix with each other and their own manure.

Florence Low/
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in which it can barely move is cruel and inhumane," said Paul Shapiro, director of the Humane Society's factory farming campaign.

The proposal, which would take effect in 2015, rides an international wave of opposition to farm-animal confinement. The European Union is already in the process of phasing

cages out altogether by 2012, and in the past two years dozens of food-industry trendsetters, from Ben & Jerry's to Burger King, have pledged to buy some or even all of their eggs from hens raised cage-free.

Cage-free eggs command a premium price. Many of the country's largest conventional egg farmers have

already diversified their operations to include some cage-free barns.

But the Humane Society's proposal in California – and the fear that similar regulations will follow elsewhere in the country – has scrambled the nation's \$6 billion egg industry.

Farmers, including many already

▶ EGGS, Page D2

Eggs: Impact on prices unclear

► FROM PAGE D1

deep into the cage-free business, say a ban on cages would run many of them out of business, drive up prices and restrict consumer choice.

What's more, they say, banning cages wouldn't do much to improve the lot of California's 19 million laying hens.

In a rare move for an industry in which each visitor to a chicken house raises the chances of a ruinous disease outbreak, some farmers have opened their barns to reporters, an effort to demonstrate that while a caged life may not give a hen everything she wants, she's likely to be cleaner and healthier than her average cage-free counterpart.

Some animal-welfare experts say they have a point.

"When you give a hen some of these behavioral freedoms, you increase health risks," said Joy Mench, a University of California, Davis, professor who has worked with both the Humane Society and mainstream egg producers to craft welfare standards for caged and cage-free hens.

In the cage-free systems, perhaps 30,000 chickens live together in huge barns, each with about 2 square feet of floor space. They get nesting spots, perches and loose material to scratch around in, but typically have no access to the out-of-doors (unlike the hens that lay certified organic and free-range eggs).

Europe's continent-wide experience in converting to cage-free egg production has already yielded thousands of pages of studies comparing the two systems, Mench said. Two key results:

- During their roughly two-year laying life, cage-free hens die at more than twice the rate of caged hens, likely the result of increased exposure to one another, and to their own manure.

- Cage-free hens suffer high rates of broken bones — 67 percent in one survey. Most modern laying hens suffer from osteoporosis, Mench said, and they're easily injured while jumping around a cage-free barn. On the other hand, she noted, workers often inadvertently break the bones of caged birds as they are removed before being euthanized.

The Humane Society's Shapiro agreed that cage-free systems are far from perfect. But, he said, while birds in a cage-free barn may face a higher risk of disease or death, the alternative — life in a cage — guarantees suffering.

Both the egg industry and Shapiro credit the power of the Humane Society's message for the boom in the market for cage-free eggs. Together with organic, free-range and other "designer" eggs, they now command more than 5 percent of the market, with sales growing strongly.

In the parking lot of the east Sacramento Trader Joe's store recently, Polly Gastaldi of Placerville said she's a regular buyer of cage-free eggs. But she has mixed feelings.

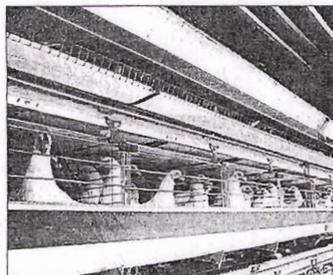
"I hate to see 'em in cages, but they say that the cage-free ones may not be so much better," she said.

Cage-free eggs are generally more expensive than conventional eggs in supermarkets, though there's a great deal of variation between brands as well as from chain to chain. In Sacramento last week, store-brand large white eggs were running between 99 cents and \$1.99 a dozen, while cage-free eggs started at \$2.29 — Gastaldi paid \$2.49 — and went as high as \$3.99.

It's unclear how much the Humane Society initiative would

A house for hens

The Humane Society is pushing a ballot measure that would make California the first state to ban the cages that house more than 90 percent of the nation's laying hens. Animal behavior experts say life in cages leaves chickens stressed. But modern cage-free systems, which likewise crowd tens of thousands of birds into a huge barn, have problems of their own.

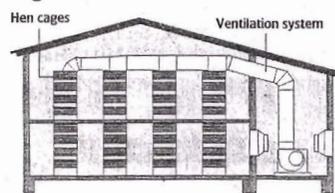


Big Dutchman USA

Caged

- Lowest production cost (about 55 cents a dozen)
- Hens cannot nest, perch or fully extend wings.
- Requires little land: cages can be stacked eight tiers high.
- Egg collection, feeding and manure removal are automated, so labor needs are low.
- Sanitary, enclosed conditions generally yield lower rates of disease.
- Hens seldom break bones during life in the cage, — though bones are often broken when the birds are pulled from the cage to be euthanized.

Caged henhouse



A hen's life

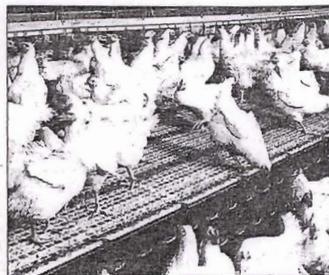
• A few days after hatching, one-third of the chick's beak is cut off, typically with a hot knife that simultaneously cauterizes the wound.

• At 16 weeks, the birds are brought into the henhouse.

• At 20 weeks, the hens begin to lay eggs.

• For roughly the next 15 months, lights are kept on 16 hours a day to simulate midsummer and keep laying rates high — roughly 23 eggs a month.

Sources: U.S. Department of Agriculture; Joy Mench, University of California, Davis; Don Bell, UC Riverside; Tom Silva, JS West & Cos.; Big Dutchman USA; Humane Society of the United States

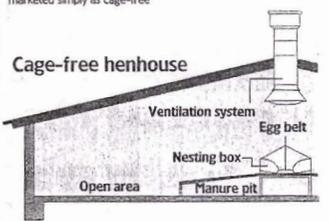


Big Dutchman USA

Cage-free

- Hens can perform natural behaviors: nesting, perching, dust bathing, extending their wings.
- Higher production cost (65–70 cents a dozen), mostly because of land and labor needs.
- Contact with manure and dusty air can lead to higher rates of disease.
- Hens often fracture bones hopping around barn.
- Birds may attack one another in both systems, but cannibalism tends to be more of a problem in cage-free operations.

Note: Free-range, organic and pastured eggs come from chickens that have access to the out-of-doors. That's not required for eggs marketed simply as cage-free.



drive up prices for consumers, because it would still allow California grocers to sell low-priced conventional eggs produced in other states. Last year, 29 percent of the 8.2 billion eggs sold in California came from out of state, according to state department of agriculture figures.

The retail price spread between caged and cage-free eggs exaggerates the difference in production costs, which is only about 12 cents a dozen, according to a 2005 review by Don Bell, an emeritus poultry specialist at the University of California, Riverside.

Bell, however, said that figure doesn't convey the impact on the industry of a ban on cages. In addition to the huge capital cost of a switch, it takes significantly more land and labor to produce cage-free eggs, and it's likely to take farmers years to optimize production in a cage-free system, he said. Outfitting a cage-free barn costs about \$14 a bird, according to equipment dealers, vs. around \$11 per bird to outfit a caged barn, though neither figure includes the price of the building.

Automation on caged chicken operations — conveyor belts, automatic feeders and mechanical manure scrapers — has made it possible for a single worker to tend 150,000 hens, said Tom Silva, a vice president at J.S. West who designed and built the company's henhouse here in

Livingston, about 10 miles south of Turlock.

The chickens are so unused to seeing anyone but caretakers in blue coveralls that Silva's appearance in the barn raises a storm of squawks. They settle down quickly and return to pecking at their endless trough of corn and soy. Silva plucks a hen from a cage. She settles quietly into the crook of his arm.

For most of these hens' lives, the lights stay on 16 hours a day. A 75-degree breeze wafts out of the ceiling and into the floor, keeping out the smell of the manure pit below. Each hen lays, on average, around 23 eggs a month.

The caretaker's daily tasks are checking the machinery and the mousetraps, and removing the 10 or so birds that die.

"Everything is engineered to be a perfect day in here, all the time," Silva said.

Several egg farmers interviewed for this story stressed that there are good and bad examples of both caged and cage-free egg barns. But even longtime cage-free farmers gave the Humane Society's proposal a tepid response.

Mike Sencer, executive vice president at Fullerton-based Hidden Villa Farms, began raising some of his chickens cage-free and organic in the early 1990s, and is now one of the country's leading suppliers. But conventional eggs remain a big

part of his company's business.

"There are consumers that want the cage-free, and some want the caged, and I see the pros and cons of both," Sencer said.

Mench, the UC Davis animal behavior expert, said caged systems have gotten significantly more humane in the last decade, with birds allotted more floor space — though the minimum is still just 67 square inches each — and enough head room so that they can stand up fully.

For her own kitchen, Mench said, she buys neither caged nor standard cage-free eggs.

Instead, she pays \$7 a dozen to Nigel Walker, whose 3,000 chickens spend most of their days outside on his farm near Dixon. Walker runs one of only two commercial-scale "pastured" egg operations in Northern California. His hens are currently pecking at what's left of his organic strawberry crop, he said.

Mench said she buys Walker's eggs not for animal-welfare reasons, but because they taste good, are laid locally and meld crop production and livestock husbandry the way old-fashioned farms did.

"I prefer to get my food from that environment," she said.

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