



Demand down: Consumers are turning off free-range eggs Picture: Rob Leeson *Source: Herald Sun*

AUSTRALIAN consumers are turning away from free-range and organic eggs as concern about budget overrides concern for animal welfare.

A survey of 5000 consumers conducted by the Australian Egg Corporation Ltd has found that hen welfare is a secondary consideration for most consumers, who are mostly happy to stick with caged chickens' eggs.

Egg Corporation managing director James Kellaway said the research, combined with anecdotal evidence from the industry, showed greater economic stress after the global financial crisis was determining shopping habits.

"There has been a slight decline in those buying free-range, and a rise in those people returning to traditional markets (such as caged eggs)," Mr Kellaway said yesterday.

"There will always be some people who will always buy free-range eggs, and that's fine, but we have anecdotal evidence which suggests that a lot of people are being very careful with discretionary expenditure."

Despite the industry's findings, free-range eggs remain a large market.

In 2009, 62 per cent of retail eggs sold were caged, with barn-laid (8 per cent) and free-range (27 per cent) comprising the rest. The figures for barn-laid and free-range sales are expected to dip slightly this year.

The Egg Corporation research, due to be released in August after surveys were conducted of 5000 people, found that only 26 per cent of respondents considered hen welfare the most important factor in their purchase.

Just 4 per cent put the sustainability of the egg farm from which the eggs came as their primary motivator, while 44 per cent put food safety as their primary concern.

Animal welfare group Animals Australia rejected the findings, saying consumers continued to take up free-range and organic eggs.

"I don't believe those figures and I think the Egg Corporation is pandering to the majority of their members, which are caged egg producers," said Animals Australia executive director Glenys Oogjes. But she said many consumers didn't realise the cruelty suffered by caged hens.

"If people knew how cruel caged eggs were, they would run screaming from buying caged eggs," she said.