

Consumers have choices of eggs

 printer friendly format  email page

Consumers have lots of choices in the kinds of eggs they buy and eat, but eggs produced in modern cage housing have animal welfare, environmental and food quality advantages. (7/1/2010) **Rod Smith**

MODERN egg production systems based on science provide consumers with a number of choices in the kinds of eggs they can buy and enjoy -- from eggs produced in conventional cage housing to eggs produced in barn/floor cage-free housing, as well as brown and white eggs, organic eggs and nutrient-fortified eggs, according to extension poultry specialist Gregory Martin at The Pennsylvania State University.

If any of those choices are taken away, consumers could feel the effects of decreased competition and increased prices for high-quality, nutritious and safe eggs, he said.

In a report, Martin noted that 85% of all eggs produced in Pennsylvania are produced in modern, conventional cage housing in accordance with the animal welfare guidelines of the United Egg Producers -- guidelines that were developed by an independent committee of animal ethicists and poultry scientists (*Feedstuffs*, Oct. 16, 2000).

In setting the standards, he said the committee reviewed all of the science concerning the space hens need to sit down, stand up, turn around and groom, as well as access to feed and water, air quality, house lighting, beak trimming, molting without feed or water withdrawal and hen handling and transportation.

In doing so, he said the committee determined that there are advantages and disadvantages to both cage and cage-free housing and that both kinds of systems are ethical and humane.

Martin listed several advantages of cage housing, including the fact that hens are kept separate from manure and, therefore, lay eggs that are kept separate from manure, so they are cleaner and have fewer pathogens than eggs laid in other systems.

Additionally, he said birds can be individually inspected for indications of disease and safety issues, cannibalism and mortality are lower and feed efficiency can be maximized due to decreased competition for feed and water.

Martin said the major advantage of cage-free housing is that the birds can roam throughout the house and engage in more of their natural behaviors such as nesting, perching and dust bathing.

Cage housing was adopted in the 1950s, and data recorded since then clearly show that hens are healthier in cages and are more protected from disease and predators than hens in cage-free and free-range operations, added Paul Patterson, a poultry science professor at the university.

Furthermore, he said data from the U.S. Department of Agriculture show that eggs laid in cage housing are cleaner and have fewer cracks and higher internal quality -- including albumen height and freshness -- than eggs laid in other systems.

Moreover, he said cage housing is more environmentally friendly because farmers can better manage manure and air and water quality.

Patterson said cage-free housing is far less efficient than modern cage systems, with cage-free hens eating 15-25% more feed and laying fewer eggs than hens in modern cages.

If all egg production in the U.S. were converted to cage-free production, he said, it's estimated that 580,000 more acres of cropland and more fertilizer and fuels would be needed to grow enough corn and soybeans to feed the increased number of hens that would be needed to maintain the U.S. egg supply.

The decreased efficiency and intense labor requirements for cage-free housing are the primary reasons cage-free eggs are more costly for consumers in retail stores, Patterson said, citing one study that found that the national average retail price for eggs laid in modern cages was \$1.20/doz., while the price for eggs produced in cage-free housing was \$2.74 (*Feedstuffs*, May 10).

He said this study estimated that if all eggs produced in the U.S. were switched to cage-free housing, the additional consumer cost would be -- across the population -- \$2.6 billion per year.

That's a cost some consumers are prepared to pay as cage-free eggs account for 5% of the U.S. market, Martin said.

However, the cost is prohibitive for most people and for large foodservice operations serving thousands of individuals, he said. Switching to all cage-free production would cost \$35 per person per year, which, "multiplied by tens of thousands of people" -- numbers served by institutions like Penn State -- "would add hundreds of thousands of dollars" to food spending.

Martin and Patterson said science is needed to improve hen care and well-being and egg production efficiency -- science that will come from the industry/university research that will be carried out to evaluate three housing systems: modern cage, enriched colony and cage-free systems (*Feedstuffs*, April 12 and May 24).

However, at this time, cage housing seems to have most of the advantages, they said.

After 30 years of raising hens in all kinds of housing systems, "I believe hens are better off in cages," Patterson said. There, he said, "farmers can better see and manage their birds, listen to their cooing and clucks, watch out for their health and welfare and maintain high-quality, safe eggs for American consumers."