



“Q: Why did the chicken cross the road? A: To escape the well-intentioned...”

A riddle with a warning for dairy farmers...

BACK IN THE DAY, layers were floor-raised like broiler chickens. To increase efficiency, lower ammonia and dust emissions, improve sanitation and reduce worker health risk, layers were eventually moved up off the floor and into the conventional battery cages that since the 50's have supplied 90% of the Canadian market.

Hens are social animals, but also need their privacy. The 24/7 togetherness of a battery cage is one thing. But what really sticks in the craw of the battery-caged hen, according to animal scientists, is her inability to engage in important birdy behaviours such as nesting and perching.

In 1999, brought to heel by a well-funded animal rights lobby, the European Union passed Directive 74, enforcing minimum standards for layer housing. EU egg producers were given until 2012 to replace old-style battery cages with improved (“furnished”) cages or switch to non-cage housing. Some nations, including Sweden, Germany, Austria and the Netherlands, banned battery cages prior to 2012.

While some non-cage (“cage-free”) systems are also “free-range” (birds have access to out of doors), the vast majority of commercial cage-free systems are aviary: closed barn, open floor housing (also

known as “free-run”).

In furnished cages – also known as “enriched” housing – birds are grouped in “colonies” of 20 to 80 hens and provided with perches and nesting boxes. Research suggests these smaller groupings (compared with open floor, aviary systems)

allow hens to form more stable social relationships (pecking orders), reducing stress and aggression. Combined with furnishings that allow for natural bird behaviour, both animal welfare and productivity improve, lowering costs.

No less an authority than Dr. Temple



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Grandin, respected world-wide for her animal welfare research, is a fan: "... enriched cages provide space for them to lie down, spread their wings and turn around, as well as offering nests, perches and scratching areas... This is the direction that producers need to take, as they have successfully already done in Europe..."

Egg Farmers of Canada banned the use of conventional caging in new or replacement layer housing as of January 1st of this year, committing to a transition strategy that should see half of Canada's eggs coming from either enriched "furnished" cage or non-cage egg production systems within 8 years, with a full transition expected within 15 years.

The choice of the housing system is up to the individual farmer. While there is an important niche market for specialty (free range and organic) produce, the majority of Canadians want AFFORDABLE eggs that are safe, fresh, local and (for many) come from birds that have had a decent life. The research clearly shows enriched caging is that system. And so enriched cages – in Canada as in Europe - have become pretty much the industry stan-

dard for new and replacement layer housing.

Good news story, right? Uh, wrong... (And here is where every farmer needs to pay close attention: What is happening now in the egg sector will almost inevitably – unless you get out in front of this now – impact you, if you are linked to animal agriculture.)

According to the international animal rights lobby – growing more powerful with every campaign - the only happy chicken is a cage-free chicken.

NEVER MIND THAT a March 2015 peer-reviewed study on layer housing funded by the Coalition for Sustainable Egg Supply (leading animal welfare scientists, academic institutions, non-government organizations, egg suppliers, and restaurant/foodservice and food retail companies) researched layer housing from the standpoint of food safety, quality, worker health/safety, environment, animal health/well-being and affordability, and concluded enriched colony housing is most beneficial to the birds, the workers and the environment, and is easiest on the consumer purse.

NEVER MIND THAT the 2015 study

also concluded that aviary (cage-free, open-barn) systems result in lower animal welfare (much higher incidence of pecking, cannibalism, piling, smothering, failed landings, broken keel bones, other broken bones), higher noxious emissions (dust particles and ammonia), lower worker safety (hazardous working conditions) and higher priced eggs than do enriched (colony or furnished) housing.

UNBLEMISHED by truth, armed with what they hope will be persuasive gory photos and incendiary rhetoric, animal welfare groups (including Compassion in World Farming, The Royal Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals, The Humane Society of the United States, The Humane Farming Association, Animal Welfare Institute, World Society for the Protection of Animals, Eurogroup for Animals and Farm Sanctuary) launched their "cage-free" campaign – funded by the well-intentioned - to brow-beat and intimidate (industry insiders use the word blackmail) more than 200 major restaurants, fast-food outlets, supermarkets, buyers clubs, manufacturers and wholesalers in the past two years alone to go "cage-free" by 2025.



[Wendy Holm is an awarding winning columnist writing from Vancouver.]

I find this incredible.

Those who have signed onto "cage-free" eggs include major restaurant chains including Denny's, Taco Bell, Burger King, Star Bucks, Tim Horton, Dunkin Donuts, MacDonalds, Subway, Wendy's, Quisnos and Chipotle; major manufacturers and distributors including Nestle, General Mills, Unilever, Hellman's, Kellogg, and Kraft/Heinz; food service companies including Sodexo, Compass Group, and Aramark; major supermarket chains and buyers clubs including Kroger (3400 stores including Harris Teeter, Ralphs, City Market, Dillons), Albertson's (2,200 stores including the flagship Albertson's and Safeway, Vons, Acme), Delhaize (1,200 east coast stores) and wholesale groups including Mendelez, BJ Wholesale Club, Costco, Trader Joes, and AHold USA.

While "cage-free" (aviary) housing may be manageable in a humane fashion on a family farm level, it will likely spell disaster for the US industry, where 50 mega-farms produce 85% of the eggs. Even if they manage to keep PETA cameras out of the barns and off CNN, conscientious or value-driven consumers will no longer have a choice – they will be offered only higher-priced, "cage-free" eggs with a bigger environmental footprint coming from hens with a lower quality of life, collected by workers facing higher health risks...)

Standing out from the pack, A&W Canada bravely announced they will source Canadian eggs from Canadian hens housed in enriched, furnished cages. Jumping into public pit-bull mode, six Canadian animal protection agencies immediately went on the attack: "The obvious problem, which the public and much of the food industry seem to recognize, is that a cage is still a cage. But A&W doesn't get it. Please tell A&W to join with other major players in the food industry and go cage-free..." This was signed by Animal Justice, Canadian Coalition for Farm Animals, Canadians for the Ethical Treatment of Farmed Animals, Humane Society International/Canada, Mercy for Animals Canada and the Van-

couver Humane Society.

Today, animal welfare lobbyists are demanding Canada's restaurant and food sector sign a petition calling on government, through its participation in the National Farm Animal Care Council, to specify ONLY ONE HOUSING SYSTEM (cage-free) in their upcoming revised Code of Practice for egg production due to be released for public discussion this May.

This self-serving misrepresentation of animal welfare needs to meet the fundraising goals of high-budget lobby groups



is scurrilous exploitation, and I am beyond shocked that it has been so successful. Are calf hutches next?

For the consumer to be assured that the animals involved in supplying the food on their plate have had - in the words of Temple Grandin - "a life worth living", governments must ensure the implementation of codes of animal practice that reflect best practices in animal welfare, and leave it to the farmer to decide which system best fits the management style of his or her family farm operation.

"It simply works the best."

— Cy Conard



Cy Conard at halter of Ridgedale-T Raichu-Red and fiancé Morgan Behnke at halter of Ridgedale Runway Red-ET. Both were approved by Holstein USA for EX95 classification in February. They are the first homebred Red and White maternal sisters to achieve this and the first Holstein sisters to do it in the same herd on the same day. They are 7th generation EX back to Roxi.

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He and fiancé Morgan Behnke and his parents Wayne and Jen operate Ridgedale Farm near Sharon Springs, New York. They milk 100 Holsteins, most homebred, with over 60 EX and 50 VG. Recently, 2 homebred sisters were approved EX95 on the same day.

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