



**ANIMAL
JUSTICE**

Caged Housing Systems For Laying Hens

Cage confinement on egg farms is the most widely addressed farmed animal welfare issue in the world with thousands of corporate cage-free commitments and dozens of cage-free laws adopted across the globe. In Canada, however, neither federal nor provincial legislation proactively establishes mandatory minimum standards of care for animals on farms. Instead, codes of practice are developed by the National Farm Animal Care Council (NFACC), a private, industry-dominated body that creates non-binding Codes of Practice.

The Code of Practice for the Care of Handling of Pullets and Laying Hens (the Layer Code) falls short of banning cage confinement and instead permits transitions to non-cage or enriched cage systems by 2036. The endorsement of caged housing systems, whether that be enriched (also known as furnished cages) or conventional cages (often referred to as battery cages), goes against global legislative trends, investor expectations and corporate policies on cage-free egg sourcing, public opinion, and animal welfare concerns.



Confinement Bans in Other Jurisdictions

The global trend is moving away from all forms of caged hen confinement. Due to welfare concerns with all forms of caged housing systems, many countries and U.S. states have made it illegal, and there are numerous countries and states that have banned the sale of caged eggs altogether. In 2023, the European Food Safety Authority also strongly came out against the use of cage confinement.²

According to industry reports from 2024, the percentage of cage-free production is 78.6% in the United Kingdom³, 62% in the European Union⁴, 38.7% in the United States⁵, and only 19.8% in Canada⁶.

As of May 2025, the ratio of caged to cage-free laying hens increased to 55/45 in the United States, where 11 states have banned or are in the process of phasing out the use of conventional cages, and some of them include furnished cages as well. There is little to no enriched cage egg market in the United States. Several European countries, including Switzerland, Austria, and Luxembourg have all banned the use of furnished cages, while others, including Germany and the Czech Republic are phasing out the practice.

Investor Expectations and Corporate Commitments

The business case for cage-free systems is robust and growing, driven by corporate commitments and investor recognition of animal welfare as a significant investment concern. For instance, the two most prominent global Environmental, Social, and Governance (ESG) frameworks used by food companies, the Sustainable Accounting Standards Board (SASB) and the Global Reporting Initiative (GRI), both include species-specific animal welfare metrics in their standards. As a result, the disclosure of cage use within investor reports is now a common requirement under these frameworks due to the associated business risk.

To date, over 2,600 cage-free policies have been adopted globally by major food companies. A remarkable 92% of those with deadlines of 2024 or prior have already fulfilled their commitments.

Over 130 companies in Canada have adopted cage-free policies, including major companies such as Nestlé, Sodexo, and Compass, all of whom are nearing the fulfillment of their cage-free policies. Five of the top ten highest-grossing restaurants in Canada—Boston Pizza, Starbucks, McDonalds, Recipe Unlimited, and most recently, A&W—are now 100% cage-free.

While progress is being made, other global companies are falling behind in Canada. Costco, for example, has gone 100% cage-free in the UK, Europe, and Mexico, 92% in the U.S., and 56% in Australia. In Canada, however, Costco trails behind at only 23% cage-free. Similarly, Kraft Heinz's latest Canadian reporting of 2% cage-free showed a significant lag behind its 77% in Europe, the Middle East, and Africa, 70% in the U.S., 40% in Asia Pacific, and 25% in Latin America.

Leading Companies Committed to Cage-Free in Canada

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Nestlé



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Rising Public Support for Cage-Free

Canadian public opinion strongly favours cage-free systems and disapproves of the current system. Recent polling consistently shows strong Canadian support for ending cage confinement.

For example, 70% of Canadians find enriched cages unacceptable, 80% support a national ban on cage confinement, and 80% are disappointed that Canada confines a higher percentage of hens in cages than the United States.¹¹

Further, the polls show that there is a consumer preference for cage-free eggs, with 80% of Canadians believing that grocery stores should commit to banning cages and indicating that they are more likely to purchase from companies who do. 60% of consumers are also willing to pay more for cage-free eggs, with only 10% of consumers ruling this out. Consumers have also expressed a desire for transparency, with more than 90% of Ontarians believing that oversight and transparency concerning farmed animal conditions are important.¹²



Human Health and Food Safety Concerns

Life in a crowded cage makes hens more vulnerable to the rapid spread of disease. Stress, restricted movement, and lack of opportunities for natural hygiene increase the risk. Salmonella, and more recently, Avian Influenza, pose serious risks to human health through the handling or consumption of contaminated eggs. For example, research conducted by the European Food Safety Authority (EFSA) found that Salmonella Enteritidis was five times more prevalent in eggs from caged hens compared to those from cage-free systems.¹³ Cage-free environments are generally cleaner, easier to sanitize and less prone to rodents and insects, while having access to bedding supports healthier gut flora and lower stress in hens, which boosts their disease resistance.¹⁴ Within intensive confinement systems, large flock sizes

and high stocking densities raise contamination risk due to the increase of volume in feces and dust and the facilitation of the spread of infections.^{15 16 17 18} Cage-free systems, with the proper use of nest boxes, can improve egg cleanliness¹⁹, reducing the number of floor eggs and improving egg hygiene.²⁰

This evidence suggests that cage-free egg production offers advantages for human health. By reducing stress, improving hygiene, and allowing for more natural hen behaviours, cage-free systems lower the risk of foodborne illnesses. This translates to safer eggs for consumers and a decreased public health burden. Prioritizing cage-free environments is a crucial step towards a healthier food supply.

Animal Welfare Concerns

Cage systems, whether conventional or enriched, severely limit the behavioural freedom of laying hens. Within these systems, hens are unable to express natural behaviours that are essential for their well-being, such as nesting, foraging, perching, scratching, wing flapping, and dustbathing (among others). The Global Coalition for Animal Welfare (GCAW), an industry-led working group, explicitly states that “cage systems for laying hens... severely restrict behavioural freedom and prevent hens from expressing highly motivated behaviours”.²¹

Furnished cages are barely distinguishable from conventional cages, still forcing hens to live in filthy, crowded conditions, deprived of the ability to engage in their natural behaviours, where they suffer from physical and psychological distress. In conventional cages, hens have less space than the size of a sheet of printer paper.²² In enriched cages, the space is increased marginally to the size of a legal sheet of paper²³. While there are some additional features (such as a solid pad for some scratching), these cages still provide hens with insufficient space, a competition between birds for the resources that are available, and an inability to express their innate behaviours^{24 25}, including perching and roosting, dustbathing and foraging, nesting, and exploration. Cage-systems severely restrict movement and exercise, entirely preventing hens from running, jumping, flying, and wing-flapping.²⁶

This confinement leads to illnesses and injuries such as osteoporosis²⁷ and bone disorders, bone fractures resulting from brittle bones, and foot disorders such as toe pad hyperkeratosis²⁸, painful lesions, and bumblefoot caused by standing on wire flooring. Caged hens often experience frustration and boredom due to overcrowding and restricted natural behaviours. This frequently results in abnormal, harmful behaviours, including feather pecking and cannibalism. Additionally, these hens are often more fearful because their confinement prevents them from escaping or hiding from other birds or barn staff, which is a fundamental aspect of a prey animal’s welfare.²⁹



As a result of the physical and psychological distress caused by caged systems, The Welfare Footprint Project found that hens in furnished cages endured 5,475 more hours of pain in their lifetimes than those in cage-free aviaries.³⁰ Additional research indicates that cage-free hens suffer significantly less pain than those in cages, with studies showing a 63% reduction in disabling pain, a 57% reduction in hurtful pain, and a 70% reduction in annoying pain³¹. Further, a 2021 meta-analysis demonstrated that with increasing experience in indoor cage-free systems, hen mortality rates decrease by 0.4% to 0.6% annually, or 4% to 6% over a decade.³² This suggests that with well-managed cage-free systems, there is a lower mortality rate and a higher overall ceiling for improved welfare.

Despite their names, “enriched” cages are still cages, and therefore still insufficient, as they do not meet the complex welfare needs of chickens. They offer only slightly more space than conventional cages and still subject birds to a life of confinement and distress. Experts like Professor Emeritus Ian Duncan from the University of Guelph, who had initial hopes for enriched cages to solve a variety of welfare issues, states that these cages “really don’t live up to that expectation”.³³ Research shows that only a cage-free system can provide hens with the ability to express their natural behaviours and provide a better quality of life.³⁴

Investigations, including undercover exposés have raised, and continue to raise, public awareness about these welfare issues and the conditions that hens living in caged systems are forced to endure.³⁵

Failure of Enriched Cage Transitions

The failure of enriched cage transitions in other jurisdictions offers a crucial lesson to Canada’s industry and its ongoing support of cage confinement. The European Union, for instance, spent billions trying to implement enriched cages as a middle ground for egg production to balance chicken welfare and production cost.³⁶ Yet, their assumption that consumers would accept these systems proved wrong; the public continued to see them as cages and preferred eggs from barn or free-range environments. This costly misstep ultimately illustrates that regulations failing to consider public opinion and consumer preferences are likely to fail.

Similarly, when faced with corporate cage-free commitments and cage-free state legislation, the U.S. egg industry initially sought national standards allowing enriched cages, similar to the creation of the current layer code in Canada. But, this ultimately failed, as public demand for cage-free eggs prevailed, and the industry had no other choice but to start listening to its customers.³⁷



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Conclusion

The shift to cage-free egg production is not merely an ethical imperative but a clear market trend driven by consumer demand, investor expectations, and global legislative action. While Canada's egg industry appears resistant, the experiences of other jurisdictions demonstrate that a successful and economically viable transition to cage-free housing systems is achievable. Continuing to invest in or defend any form of caged system puts Canadian egg producers and trade groups at odds with global progress, corporate responsibility commitments, consumer values, and ultimately, the future of the egg industry.

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