

# Breaking out

The cage-free controversy continues as the industry scrambles to get on board

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When Kroger announced on March 4 that it would convert all of its stores to cage-free eggs by 2025, it capped a frenetic period of proclamations by food companies making a cage-free commitment. In a virtual tidal wave of announcements, nearly 100 retailers, restaurants, food manufacturers and foodservice companies have revealed cage-free plans in the last year. When fast-food giant McDonald's made its announcement six months earlier, it started a tsunami of change.

Josh Balk, senior director of food policy at the Humane Society of the United States (HSUS), calls the announcements by Kroger and McDonald's "the tipping point" in the cage-free discussion. He continued: "When the largest grocer and the largest restaurant chain commit to cage free, companies no longer have an ability to defend cage confinement of animals to mainstream consumers."

One producer puts it another way. "Now it's a rush not to be last."

## A MOVE TO IMPROVE

Conventional cages for laying hens grew out of the post-World War II industrialization of agriculture. Before the war, egg production was largely a cottage industry, with mostly small flocks raised outside on family farms. There were many challenges for egg producers and their hens. Predators, cannibalism, and disease put hen mortality over 40 percent; with the average hen producing about 150 eggs per year.

In the 1930s and 40s, producers experimented with housing birds in small cages. Along with improved genetics and nutrition this provided a number of advantages to producers, including:

- Protection from predators;
- Reduced cannibalism;
- Feeding and watering systems that provide even timid birds with the proper nutrition;
- Improved sanitary conditions;
- Improved egg collection and cleaning;
- Lower labor costs;
- More birds housed per sq. ft., lowering



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## 5 FREEDOMS OF ANIMAL WELFARE UNDER HUMAN CONTROL

1. FREEDOM FROM HUNGER AND THIRST
2. FREEDOM FROM DISCOMFORT
3. FREEDOM FROM PAIN, INJURY OR DISEASE
4. FREEDOM TO EXPRESS NORMAL BEHAVIOR
5. FREEDOM FROM FEAR AND DISTRESS

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– JOSH BALK

capital and operating costs; and

- Mortality reduced to 5 percent; hens produced 260 to 300 eggs per year.

Efficient and productive, conventional cages rapidly became the standard for housing systems. It was a boon to producers and consumers, providing cheap eggs to an egg hungry nation. As it turns out, it wasn't a boon for the birds.

### TRUBLE AHEAD

As the cage system flourished in the 1950s and '60s, concerns were raised about the cramped conditions of cages. A typical cage might have about 500 sq. in. of space. Housing six to eight birds per cage, each bird's space was less than the size of a piece of copy paper. Resting their feet on wire mesh, hens were unable to stand fully erect, stretch out, or flap their wings.

A 1964 book critical of intense agricultural methods, led the United Kingdom Farm Animal Welfare Council in 1979 to adopt the “Five Freedoms of Animal Welfare Under Human Control.” Now considered the standard for evaluating animal agricultural systems worldwide, the Five Freedoms are:

1. Freedom from hunger and thirst
2. Freedom from discomfort
3. Freedom from pain, injury or disease
4. Freedom to express normal behavior
5. Freedom from fear and distress

Viewed against the context of the five freedoms, there is strong evidence that the

physical comfort of birds in cages is poor. Hens can experience chronic pain and weak bones due to cage structure. Scientists say the most telling loss of freedom for laying hens is the inability to express normal behavior – from raising its head, flapping its wings, or the ability to find privacy in the egg laying act.

Nobel Prize-winning scientist Dr. Konrad Lorenz wrote: “The worst torture to which a battery hen is exposed is the inability to retire somewhere for the laying act. For the person who knows something about animals it is truly heart-rending to watch how a chicken tries again and again to crawl beneath her fellow cage mates to search there in vain for cover.”

Growing public concern accelerated in 2005 with an HSUS campaign to raise consumer awareness about the plight of caged hens. “Cage free” has since become fixed in popular jargon. Cage-free operations had always been around in a small way, but have been considered as a niche position in the natural/organic marketplace. Consumer demand has pushed cage free to the mainstream.

### “WHAT'S BEST FOR THE BIRD?”

There are two main categories of cage-free systems: indoor and outdoor. Indoor systems are referred to as “cage free.” Outdoor systems that allow birds to move between a barn and an outdoor environment are referred to as “free range and pasture raised.” Both systems allow birds a greater ability for natural expression



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than the conventional cage system.

John Brunnquell is president and founder of Egg Innovations LLC, and his company has been producing free-range eggs for over 20 years. Rather than asking “What’s the least expensive way to produce an egg?” Brunnquell says their system evolved by asking the question: “What’s best for the bird?” He points out, “Chickens want to scratch, dustbathe, perch, socialize, and pasture” as an expression of normal behavior. “For instance, we found that if we gave birds an opportunity to perch, that absolutely 100 percent of them would perch. So, if birds want to exhibit a behavior, why wouldn’t you give them the opportunity to perform that behavior?”

Egg Innovations farms are built with that perspective in mind. While a conventional cage operation might house 500,000 birds in a 10 acre farm, an Egg Innovations free range farm will have 20,000 birds in the same area – plenty of room to express natural behaviors. This includes 6 in. of perch space in barns for each bird. With over 1.6 million birds, that’s over 151 miles of perches.

**CONVERSION ACCELERATING**

It’s no longer a discussion about whether to convert egg production from cage to cage-free operations, but rather when it will happen. In 2012, total cage-free operations were estimated to be 5 percent of the overall hen laying population – by 2015, that estimate grew to 10 percent. Projections from the American Egg Board say that by the end of 2016 over 15 percent of the 310 million table egg layers will

**The question is no longer whether or not to convert egg production to cage free, but rather how soon the conversion can happen.**

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*“The industry is going to run out of money for conversions in 24 to 36 months.”*

– MARCUS RUST

be cage-free and organic free-range hens.

And the pace is quickening. Brunnquell reports that cage-free facilities under construction or in the serious planning stage will add another 55 million birds to that number. In the foreseeable future, the population of cage-free facilities will exceed 33 percent of the laying hen population.

**IF YOU BUILD IT, THEY WILL PAY?**

Marcus Rust is CEO of Seymour, Indiana-based Rose Acre Farms, the country’s second largest egg producer and he is concerned about the cost of converting to cage-free facilities.

“We operate on a 30-year capital plan for replacing our facilities. Our market-based egg prices are based on the average cost of facilities in that 30-year span. To convert every facility to cage free in a 10-year span is adding artificially high costs to the system.” He is concerned about the egg industry’s ability to keep pace with customer commitments to cage free in less than 10 years. “The industry is going to run out of money for conversions in 24 to 36 months.”

A study at the Univ. of California, Davis, compared the cost of cage-free barn housing to conventional cage housing in 2015. It reported the average cost to produce cage-free eggs was about 25 cents per dozen higher than conventional eggs. Of the 25 cents, about 7 cents was attributed to higher pullet cost

(pullets must be trained differently to enter a cage free environment), 5 cents to higher labor costs, and about 10 cents for higher capital costs. The other 3 cents comes from a combination of additional feed, energy and miscellaneous costs.

Will consumers pay more for eggs? “If you interview consumers,” Rust says, “60 to 70 percent say they will buy cage-free eggs, but the reality is that only 7 percent are currently purchasing eggs produced in a cage-free environment.”

**CAGE-FREE CONCERNS**

Egg producers say going cage free does not always mean that chickens are living the good life. Some cage-free barns don’t provide the individual hen with any more space than the cage. Brunnquell says, “There are people who will do cage free really well, and some who won’t. As opposed to looking at the welfare of the bird, some will just try to meet the designation (of cage free).”

Studies have cited a higher mortality rate due to cannibalism, foot problems due to walking in manure, air quality issues from manure and lower productivity as some of the negative aspects of cage-free systems.

Brunnquell says those elements can be overcome. “It takes an elevated level of management,” he states. Egg Innovations overcomes potential downsides through a systems approach that integrates “building, management and equipment.” The company’s innovative and proprietary systems ensure that productivity and quality are met by providing the best environment for the bird.

There is thought that the future appearance of laying hen housing does not end with the move to indoor cage-free production. Balk of HSUS calls cage free, “the new norm. It’s a massive step forward, but innovation beyond is always possible.”

Brunnquell agrees. “Seventy-one percent of people who hear ‘cage free’ believe it means that birds are outside. Once they know cage free is inside, many will be asking for free range and pasture raised.”

The cage-free transition marches on. While there are a number of unknowns about the path to a cage-free 2025, Brunnquell sums up the method as he sees it: “Do what’s best for the bird.” 

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