

Response to the Coalition for a Sustainable Egg Supply (CSES) 2015 study results

The CSES was a group facilitated by the animal agribusiness crisis management firm CMA Consulting, and is primarily made up of egg producers, industry trade associations, food manufacturers and retailers. The research reports released by CSES in March of 2015 assess conventional battery cage hen housing for egg production and two alternatives: colony cages and cage-free production.

Potential for bias

A common thread that unites many of the stakeholders in the CSES is an interest in maintaining cage confinement. The approach to the study and the questions asked suggest that there was a preference for cage systems before the research even began. Indeed, researchers involved in the study have long been critical of cage-free systems. The CSES does not represent a true balance of interests.

Research results are largely the product of the questions being asked. The CSES seems to have chosen measures that made their preferred system come out on top. For example, there is very little emphasis on hens' behavioral freedoms (and how that improves their welfare), and no measurement of any of the indicators that probably would have favored the cage-free system—such as fearfulness, trapping-related injuries, comfort of the birds at resting and nesting, and dust-bathing bout length. Hens run, jump, fly, explore, make choices regarding their micro-climate, perform nest-site selection, and can roost high up off the floor (which they greatly prefer) in an aviary. Two whole papers were devoted to air quality and environmental emissions, but there was hardly a mention of the advantages of behavioral freedom in cage-free production in any of the papers published to date.

Asking the wrong questions

Rather than attempt to advance best practices, the CSES focuses on current systems. **However, an important goal in egg production should be to raise the bar for the care and treatment of animals on farms.** Like food safety, animal welfare is an ethical imperative. There's an inherent limit on animal welfare within cage confinement, because the lack of space makes it impossible to provide for the behavioral well-being of hens. Cage-free systems have the highest welfare potential, and research efforts could have—and should have—focused on developing best practices for cage-free production. Many commercial cage-free producers have results that surpass what the CSES reported, and a more useful research direction would be to identify those factors that make the best farms run so well.

Lack of experience

The CSES study was conducted at a farm that had considerable experience managing caged hens, but the cage-free facility was newly built. Differences in mortality and other metrics between the cage-free and cage systems may have been due more to the learning curve of managing a new housing system than to the housing system itself. Across the country, those producers with experience raising hens in cage-free systems have had much better results.

Results not generalizable

While battery and colony cage designs are all largely similar, cage-free housing varies considerably. The CSES study might have come to different conclusions if a different cage-free system, a different rearing system, different hen genetics, or different management practices had been used. **The results of this one study cannot be generalized to all cage-free housing.**