

# Some See Cage Accord as a Good Start

Published by [Food Safety News](#) | Jul 25, 2011

The recent deal between the Humane Society of the United States (HSUS) and the United Egg Producers (UEP), more commonly known as adversaries, to improve egg-laying hens' living conditions struck many as surprising, for many different reasons.

As reported earlier, cattle and pork producers are not pleased about the agreement, with the National Pork Producer's Council saying such proposal would take away "producers' freedom to operate in a way that's best for their animals ..."

Some animal welfare groups and their volunteers are delighted at the prospect of change.

High schooler Kitty Jones had gathered more than 10,000 signatures to get an initiative on the Washington state ballot that would have kept hens out of stacked or confining cages. The Yes On 1130 campaign attracted the largest number of signatures ever collected in any HSUS project, according to Paul Shapiro, director of the national Humane Society's Farm Animal Protection. In remarks posted on the organization's website, Jones said she was "indescribably proud" of the impact of what has happened.

David Shirk, a fellow volunteer, agreed. "I think it's amazing," he said. "We all thought we working to help just six and a half million animals and we ended up getting the chance to help all of the egg laying hens in the entire country."

Those hens number 280 million, and their welfare has been the focus of other groups, too. The ASPCA and The Humane Society Veterinary Medical Association supported the now abandoned ballot initiative in Washington, and there was veterinary endorsement for a similar ballot initiative in Oregon.

Both of those measures sought greater freedoms for laying hens than laws passed this year by the Oregon and Washington state legislatures.

The Oregon Humane Society, which is distinct from the national group, was actually at odds with the planned Oregon initiative, which was supported by HSUS. The Oregon Humane Society worked hard for SB 805, which HSUS said did not go far enough. The measure's critics saw it as too weak on the industry for a variety of reasons, such as exemptions for liquid and dried egg products.

Now, Sharon Harmon of the Oregon Humane Society is cautiously optimistic about the national agreement, calling it a great start. The goal for it to become federal law in 2011 is ambitious, she notes, and if the proposed standards become law later than this year, that will delay the timeline for implementation of the new law in Oregon.

"Hopefully this provision for all finished egg products will survive the federal law-making process," continued Harmon. "We did not feel our bill would succeed with these products regulated under the welfare standards, given the influence of the food product industry."

Compassion Over Killing (COK) is another animal rights group that saluted the agreement. COK has fought for better conditions for animals since 1995; their efforts for laying hens include battles over labeling.

"If it's enacted, it will be the first time there will be federal legislation for animals raised for food while living on the farm," said Erica Meier, director. "And another really important component of the agreement is mandatory labeling. When consumers go to the grocery store they are bombarded with phrases and imagery. For example, you'll often (see an image of) a laying hen on a nest, and this is far-fetched from the reality of the situation. We're glad to see that mandatory labeling, in addition to standards for care -- this is a very good step forward."

COK's on-farm investigations into claims of "Animal Care Certified" -- a term printed on UEP egg cartons -- led to filing a federal-rulemaking petition with the FDA, USDA, and FTC. In the fall of 2006, the FTC ruled that UEP could no longer use the term. However, the phrasing still appears.

Labeling is addressed in the landmark agreement between UEP and HSUS, mandating labeling for all shell and liquid egg cartons nationwide. While some critics of the agreement are dubious of the ability to pass uniform regulations, given the current government climate, when and if the agreement results in legislation, ironing out the definition and terms for labeling is going to remain a tricky issue.

Understanding egg cartons in supermarkets already requires significant deciphering. There's at least one app for that, provided by the World Society for the Protection of Animals. (Eggs are just one food the Eat Humane app decodes.)

Animal rights groups aren't the only ones paying attention to laying hens. Researchers, both government and industry funded scientists, are studying a variety of housing options.

The HSUS-UEP agreement will phase in so-called enriched cages over 15 years. Enriched cages, also called colony or furnished cages, give birds more room than the industry standard barren battery cages now in use, but are still confinement systems.

The average commercial laying hen now has 67 square inches, or less than the size of a sheet of paper. Battery cages have been the standard shape for hen housing since the 1950s. Cages are generally two feet by two feet, and home to many birds.

There is not universal agreement among those who study hens and the egg industry that any hen housing system is the preferred method, for either bird health or food safety.

"There's a lot of conflicting information out there in regards to the level of Salmonella contamination risk in birds that are laying eggs in cage-free systems," said Candace Croney, of the Ohio State University School of Veterinary Medicine. "One of the concerns of many of our animal health experts and the folks who are involved in egg production is we don't want to be necessarily committing a large percentage to cage-free systems if we're not really clear what the risks are in terms of Salmonella and other forms of contamination both for the birds and their products."

Until now, most of the research on cage-free and alternative hen housing situations has been conducted in Europe.

"Many of those systems are inadequately tested in the United States," Croney continued. "Several of the animal activist groups will say that's just an excuse not to do anything different, but there are genuine concerns there."

One issue Croney identified is evidence of broken bones in birds housed in aviaries, where the birds have freedom to fly up and down. Another issue is that in an uncaged system, birds come in contact with fecal matter on the floor, and so do eggs.

"One of the big factors for putting birds in cages in the first place was to get them off the ground and away from their feces," said Peter Holt, recently retired from the USDA ARS Experiment Station in Watkinsville, GA. "This helped to reduce a number of infectious disease problems. Some recent studies have shown an increase in bird mortality and disease in ground-raised birds. Interestingly, this did not seem to include Salmonella. I think the jury is still out on this issue."

Holt, whose opinions do not represent the USDA or the Agricultural Research Service, is pleased by the collaboration between UEP and HSUS. However, in an email exchange prior to the announcement, he said he felt that alternatives to battery cages were being pursued before there's a clear understanding of what is best for animal welfare and food safety.

One of the projects underway in Georgia is a four-year study of alternative housing systems for laying hens. Three 50,000 bird houses - traditional, furnished and aviary - are being evaluated for bird welfare, environmental impact and food safety.

Last year's Poultry Science Association Annual Meeting identified the social sustainability of egg production as an emerging issue, and four papers presented at the meeting are available on the group's website. One white paper studied the impact of different housing systems on egg safety and quality, but did not come up with a conclusive recommendation beyond calling for the egg industry and government to provide resources to study the implications of the various housing options.

Patricia Hester from the Department of Animal Sciences at Purdue was part of a group that worked on a paper on hen welfare in different housing systems.

"The review of past science shows that conventional cages, enriched colony housing units (enriched cages), non-cage systems, and outdoor systems for egg laying hens each have their advantages and disadvantages," said Hester. "There is no perfect housing system for laying hens."

Hester noted that the egg industry is proactive in evaluating alternatives to conventional cages, pointing to a website that shows a live view of hens in enriched colony housing units at JS West and Companies.

A commercial scale study of alternative hen housing systems is underway to try to generate some data. The Center for Food Integrity is facilitating the Coalition for Sustainable Egg Supply. Food industry giants such as UEP, McDonald's, Bob Evans, Sysco and others are teaming up with universities, including Michigan State and University of California-Davis.

They are studying cage-free, enriched, and battery cages with regard to hen health, food safety, worker safety, the environment and also, food affordability.