

Proposed poultry standards leave Australia trailing behind other industrialised countries

Written by Clive Phillips, Professor of Animal Welfare, Centre for Animal Welfare and Ethics, The University of Queensland

Battery cages will not be phased out of Australia's chicken farms, according to a draft of [industry guidelines](#) released this week.

The proposed [Australian Animal Welfare Standards and Guidelines for Poultry](#), currently open for public consultation, will if approved form the basis of federal and state legislation on poultry welfare.

A [supporting paper](#) to the standards argues that extra cage space does not guarantee better welfare for hens. Further, it claims that battery cages allow better inspection and more efficient management of the birds, the biosecurity risks and the environmental impact.

Read more: [How to know what you're getting when you buy free-range eggs](#)

But continuing battery farming flies in the face of a global trend, as both countries and consumers turn against small cages.

Why do we battery farm?

In the latter half of the last century, a system of restraining laying hens in rows of small cages (like the [cells in a battery](#)), with up to five in each, became popular as a means of maintaining good health and high productivity in large numbers of birds.

This was introduced to meet a growing demand for national [self-sufficiency in food production](#) after two world wars which threatened, and at times delivered, widespread famine. Now the world has moved on and global trade is flourishing, but the battery cage remains.

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Read more: [What comes first: the free-range chicken or the free-range egg?](#)

It was not long before the poor welfare of birds in these “battery cages” became a concern for consumers. In 1964, Ruth Harrison’s [Animal Machines](#) described the restriction on birds’ behaviour; their inability to forage for food, flap their wings, preen and dust-bathe; and the strange, injurious plucking of other birds’ feathers that is so common in these small spaces.

Scientists then proved that birds had a strong motivation to perform many of the behaviours that were rendered impossible in the cages, such as [laying eggs in a nest](#). They also found that birds in small cages are [more fearful](#) than those in more spacious accommodation.

Research has also shown that hen don’t adapt to the cages, because the longer they are confined the more they compensate by [flapping and stretching when released](#).

Moving away from battery farming

In 1999 the [European Union](#) announced a [ban on battery cages from 2012](#), 20 years after [Switzerland](#) became the first country in the world to phase them out. [New Zealand](#) and [Canada](#) are now in their phase-out period, ending all battery cage egg production in 2022 and 2032, respectively.

In the United States, a state-by-state ban has been progressing, often stimulated by the requirements of retail outlets. So far [three states, California, Michigan and Ohio](#), have taken action to end the production of eggs in battery cages. Several major retailers have now committed to cage-free eggs.

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While Australia's draft standards conclude that birds in battery cages have an acceptable level of welfare, many Australians don't agree. The proportion of caged eggs sold in supermarkets has fallen from [75% to 49%](#) over the past decade.

Read more: [Double standards in animal ethics: why is a lab mouse better protected than a cow?](#)

The supermarket chains recognise their customers' concerns and are phasing out eggs from battery cages: [Coles](#) from their own brand from 2013, and [Woolworths](#) and [Aldi](#) applying the ban to all eggs from 2025.

The European Union has developed and supported [furnished cages](#), which are much larger than previous cages and specifically provide necessary "enrichment items" such as [perches, nests, and litter for pecking and scratching](#).

The Australian standards argue that these are only required for the birds' mental state, not their biological functioning. This view implies that a hen's mental suffering is unconnected to its welfare, a claim that has been steadily eroding in the face of [research into animal consciousness](#).

For example, my research group recently discovered that [hens' vocalisations](#) are more informative to other hens than thought possible, demonstrating their capacity for rich communication.

To deny the significance of an animal's mental state is to deny the premise of animal welfare at all. Without this consideration, animals would basically have the same rights as plants.

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Read more: [We have animal welfare laws but they don't stop the suffering](#)

Despite this, the proposed standards' accompanying paper relies on narrowly restricted studies, such as a report from industry body Australian Egg that claims there are no difference in the stress levels of birds in [battery cages, barns and free-range farms](#) .

Only 12 flocks in total were studied. The stress hormone cortisol was used as the basis of comparison between farm types, even though [little enters the egg and confounding variables are likely to affect cortisol levels](#)

These limitations are why much animal science today looks at welfare in terms of behaviour, disease and lifetime measures as well as biological markers.

It's disappointing to see Australia's welfare standards trail behind much of the world and the clearly expressed attitude of many Australians. With the standards open for consultation until February 26, it is to be hoped that consumer advocate groups, researchers and members of the public register their concern.

The [public consultation period](#) runs until February 26.

Clive Phillips consults to Voiceless as a member of their Scientific Committee and is on the Board of Minding Animals. He has received funding from ASEAN for the development of poultry standards for ASEAN countries.

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