
Feathering

whose nest?



Farm animal welfare, it's in your hands.



04 **Conventional cages**



06 **'Enriched' battery cages**



08 **Alternative systems**



10 **The future for laying hens**

The suffering

The evidence clearly shows hens confined in cages suffer intensely. During their year-long laying life:

- **they cannot move about properly or even turn around without difficulty**
- **they stand on wire-mesh floors**
- **they can't stretch or flap their wings properly**
- **they cannot properly carry out important natural behaviours, such as nesting, dustbathing, perching and scratching.**

Battery farming is the only UK farming system that imposes such a severe degree of confinement on a large number of farm animals for their entire productive lives.

The alternatives

The RSPCA believes all hens should be kept in free-range or barn systems, which allow them to:

- **move around**
- **perch**
- **nest**
- **scratch**
- **dustbathe.**

Feathering

whose nest?



Summary

Cruel conventional battery cages will be banned in the European Union (EU) from 2012 – but the RSPCA believes the so-called ‘enriched’ battery cages which will still be allowed after this date are just as bad.

The 21 million hens currently condemned to a miserable existence in battery cages would continue to suffer in these ‘enriched’ battery cages, which permit a minimum usable space for each hen that is smaller than an A4 page. The government has launched a consultation on whether ‘enriched’ battery cages should be allowed in England.

Germany has already shown its commitment to farm animal welfare by:

- bringing forward the ban on conventional cages
- agreeing to ban ‘enriched’ battery cages.

The RSPCA wants all cages – both conventional and ‘enriched’ – to be banned in England well before the 2012 deadline and at the latest by the end of 2006.

Alternative systems that allow higher welfare are well established commercially in the UK and could replace caged systems. Buying eggs from such systems would add only a few pence extra a week on the average shopping bill, but would bring vast improvements to hen welfare. The RSPCA calls on consumers to exercise their immense power to improve the lot of laying hens by buying only free-range or barn eggs. Already, some supermarkets and caterers have agreed to stop selling eggs from cruel caged systems – the RSPCA wants consumers to make their views clear and encourage more retailers to follow suit.

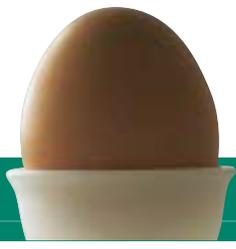
Laying hen welfare in the EU

Overwhelming scientific evidence revealing the severe welfare problems suffered by battery hens led to a new EU Laying Hens Directive (1999/74/EC) in 1999. It set a cut-off date of 2012 by which time conventional, barren battery cages would be banned throughout the EU.

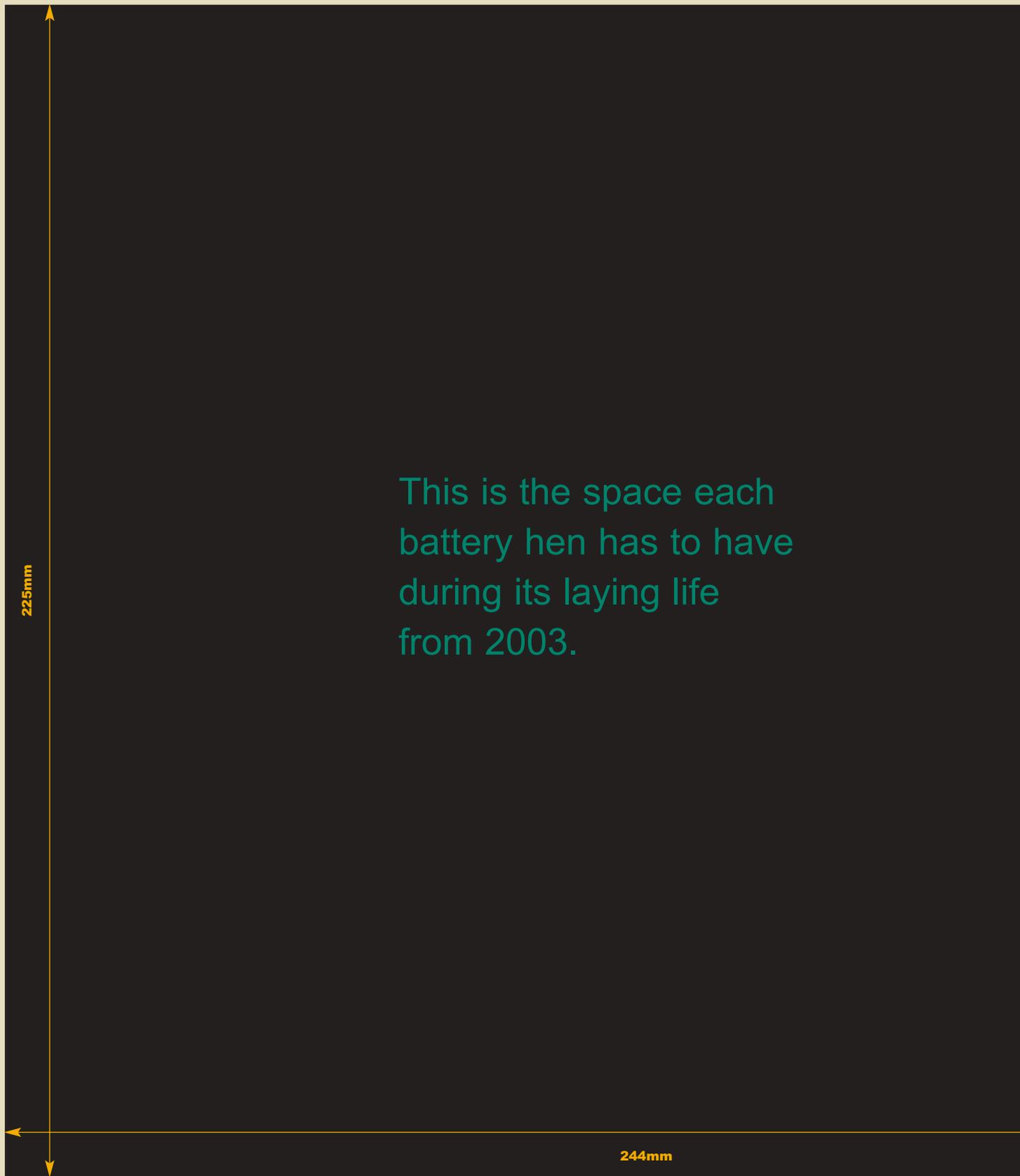
The RSPCA welcomes aspects of the Directive, but believes that:

- the long phase-out of conventional cages means many millions of hens will continue to suffer in appalling conditions
- allowing the indefinite use of ‘enriched’ battery cages is totally unacceptable and will cause hens almost as much suffering as conventional cages.

The Directive also set minimum welfare standards for alternative systems, such as barn and free-range, where birds are not kept in cages.



Conventional battery cages



This is the space each battery hen has to have during its laying life from 2003.

225mm

244mm

Welfare problems

The battery cage system imposes large-scale suffering on birds. Most EU laying hens are kept in conventional cages, including 68 per cent of UK hens – 21 million birds a year.

Typically, five birds have been crammed into one small cage, and each has just 450cm² of space – less than an A4 sheet of paper. They stand on wire-mesh floors, unable to stretch or flap their wings properly, turn around comfortably or exercise. They suffer constantly throughout their year-long productive lives. There are no provisions for nesting, perching, dustbathing or scratching – all important natural behaviours to hens.

Scientific evidence – using fear, frustration and pain as indicators of poor welfare – clearly shows laying hens suffer in battery cages. Experiments have shown hens will try very hard to reach a nesting box when feeling the urge to lay. It is also important to hens to have access to material suitable for dustbathing and scratching. The research illustrates the importance of performing nesting and scratching behaviours to laying hens. Research has also shown hens will 'work' to gain more space than is provided in battery cages.

The severe degree of confinement can cause osteoporosis (fragile bones) and the bones often break when the birds are removed from the cages prior to slaughter. Scientific research has shown that nearly a third of birds from battery cages have broken bones at the end of their lives (Gregory and Wilkins, 1989)¹.

Welfare in battery cage systems is poor, even with high standards of management, because of the severe inherent problems in the system.

What the EU Directive lays down for conventional battery cages

From 1 January 2003, the minimum space per hen must be increased slightly to 550cm² – still considerably smaller than an A4 page. After this date, no new conventional battery cages can be brought into use. From 1 January 2012, the use of conventional barren battery cages will be prohibited.

What the RSPCA wants

The phase-out period until 2012 for conventional battery cages is unacceptably long. Germany has shown it is committed to improving laying hen welfare by deciding to bring forward the date of the ban to the end of 2006. The RSPCA believes the UK should follow Germany's lead and prevent millions of birds suffering unnecessarily.

¹ British Poultry Science 30: 555-562



'Enriched' battery cages



The RSPCA believes 'enriched' battery cages share many of the serious welfare problems common to the conventional cage shown here.

Welfare problems

'Enriched' battery cages provide a little more space and supposedly facilities for nesting, perching and scratching. In reality the area per hen is still totally insufficient for them to perform many natural behaviours or move about properly. These cages only need to supply 600cm² of usable area per bird – still less than the size of an A4 page. Research shows hens need much more space than this to perform many important behaviours properly (Dawkins & Hardie, 1989)² – see table below.

Behaviour	Space used (cm ²)
Standing	428 – 592
Ground scratching	655 – 1217
Turning	978 – 1626
Wing stretching	660 – 1476
Wing flapping	1085 – 2606
Feather ruffling	609 – 1362
Preening	800 – 1977

As well as the lack of space per bird, the inadequate total size of 'enriched' battery cages means there is no room to exercise and escape social conflict. The problem of fragile bones caused by lack of exercise remains an issue with 'enriched' battery cages.

In Switzerland the conventional battery cage was banned in 1992.

A large-scale trial examined the effects of 'enriched' battery cages on welfare. The research showed high mortality, injuries and severe feather damage in 'enriched' battery cages and problems with encouraging dustbathing behaviour. For this reason, 'enriched' battery cages are not allowed in Switzerland – birds must be housed in non-cage systems.

'Enriched' battery cages are being trialled on a small scale in the UK. There are many practical problems in addition to the welfare problems. For example, it has proved difficult to provide scratching material in the cages. The RSPCA believes it is impossible to satisfy hens' dustbathing needs in 'enriched' battery cages because they do not provide enough litter or space to perform the behaviour properly. The height within 'enriched' battery cages is too low to allow proper perching behaviour.

The RSPCA believes the various types of 'enriched' battery cage are wholly inappropriate for the needs of laying hens. For example, although each hen is supposed to have access to 15cm of perch, in some cases this is provided in a crossover design. This makes much of the perch inaccessible and unusable if all the birds want to use it, for instance at night. This clearly makes a mockery of the ethos behind the EU Laying Hens Directive, which aimed to ensure that welfare needs of hens are adequately catered for.

What the EU Directive lays down for 'enriched' battery cages

From 1 January 2003 only 'enriched' battery cages can be installed for new battery cage systems. By 1 January 2012, the only cage systems allowed will be 'enriched' systems. The RSPCA believes that the costs of installing 'enriched' battery cages in line with the Directive's requirements are likely to be greater than for installing barn systems where birds are not caged. The 'enriched' cages must have:

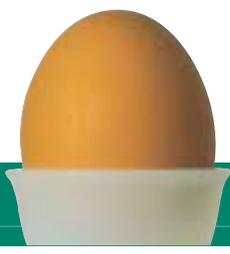
- 750cm² of cage area per hen, of which 600cm² is usable
- a nest ■ litter
- perches allowing 15cm per hen
- a height of 45cm over the usable area.

These minimum standards must be applied throughout the EU, but individual member states may set higher standards when implementing the Directive into national law. Germany, for example, has decided to ban 'enriched' battery cages from 2012, rather than allowing their indefinite use.

What the RSPCA wants

So-called 'enriched' battery cages are totally unsatisfactory for bird welfare. Given the severity of the associated welfare problems, there is no good reason to allow them to be used – particularly as they are not in proper commercial use in the UK – so 'enriched' battery cages must be banned in the UK as soon as possible. Farmers should be encouraged to move to alternative systems that allow higher welfare, such as barn and free-range, instead of spending money on expensive and cruel 'enriched' battery cages.

² British Poultry Science 30: 413-416



Alternative systems

Around 90 per cent of the UK's alternative systems operate to the RSPCA's own welfare standards under the Freedom Food scheme.



Welfare benefits

Alternative systems – such as free-range and barn systems where hens are not kept in cages – can offer a high quality of life for laying hens if they are well managed.

In the UK, 32 per cent of laying hens are kept in alternative systems. They are kept in colonies in buildings, with the opportunity to move around and express normal behaviours. Usually birds have facilities such as nest boxes for egg-laying, perches for roosting and litter for foraging and dustbathing. There may also be access to an outdoor pasture for ranging. Clearly, this truly enriched environment is far more suited to the needs of laying hens than a conventional or so-called ‘enriched’ battery cage.

The UK has many examples of well-run alternative systems that are commercially successful. Around 90 per cent of the UK's alternative systems operate to the RSPCA's own welfare standards under the Freedom Food scheme. The standards are detailed welfare requirements relating to husbandry and management that reflect up-to-date scientific developments and practical experience.

EU marketing regulations have generally defined conditions for alternative systems. In order to use the descriptions ‘free-range’ or ‘barn’ on egg boxes, certain requirements have to be met. More recently the Laying Hens Directive also lays down minimum standards to protect hen welfare in alternative systems.



Birds in alternative systems are kept in colonies in buildings, with the opportunity to move around and express normal behaviours.

What the EU Directive lays down for alternative systems

The words ‘free-range’ or ‘barn’ describe eggs produced by uncaged birds. The Directive lays down the minimum space requirement per bird in these systems along with the provision of nest boxes, perches and litter. There must be no more than nine birds per square metre of usable area (1,111 cm² per bird) and at least 250cm² of litter per hen.

Marketing regulations require free-range systems to supply birds with continuous daytime access to open-air runs, mainly covered with vegetation. There must be no more than 2,500 hens per hectare of range.

Birds in barn systems do not have to have access to outdoors.

What the RSPCA wants

All laying hens must be kept in well-managed alternative systems. The RSPCA's welfare standards for laying hens detail the provisions it would like to see for all alternative systems. At present these are implemented through the RSPCA's Freedom Food scheme, which is voluntary. The standards require that birds are not too crowded, and have space to perform normal behaviours. The Society believes the maximum number of hens per hectare on the outdoor range should be 1,000, rather than the 2,500 allowed by law.



The future for laying hens



The EU Directive will be reviewed in 2005. Already, the industry has lobbied to overturn the Directive requirement that 'enriched' cage heights must be 45cm, so that they can continue to use existing battery cages with minor modifications (The International Egg Commission July Newsletter, 2000). The RSPCA is concerned that some sectors of the egg industry may be seeking to undermine the requirements of the Directive, despite the scientific evidence of the severe welfare problems associated with battery cages.

The cost of a ban

Research by independent economists has shown the costs to consumers of banning battery cages will be very small. Research³ has shown the impact of banning battery cages on average weekly food expenditures would be less than 3p. It concluded the effect of banning cages on average food budgets would be 'largely insignificant'. Much of the cost of eggs is taken up in packaging rather than the eggs themselves.

Buying power

Consumers have immense power to improve the conditions in which 21 million laying hens are kept in the UK each year. By buying free-range or barn eggs, they give retailers a clear message that eggs from cage systems are unacceptable.

Growing support

A recent RSPCA-commissioned MORI poll revealed an overwhelming 86 per cent of people think battery cage systems are cruel, and 78 per cent believe the government should ban them now, as a priority.

Supermarkets and caterers are already supporting the move away from battery cage systems, with Marks & Spencer leading the way by selling only free-range eggs and using free-range eggs in all their products. The RSPCA believes that, if cages are banned in England, supermarkets should support UK agriculture by pledging not to buy eggs from battery cage systems elsewhere.

Conclusions

- **All cages – whether traditional battery or so-called 'enriched' – are inherently cruel and cause laying hens to suffer throughout their productive lives.**
- **Alternative, non-caged systems are commercially successful in the UK.**
- **The average cost to consumers of banning all forms of battery cage would amount to only a few pence a week.**
- **The majority of the public thinks battery cages are cruel and wants to see them banned.**
- **Some supermarkets and caterers are responding to public demand and opting to stock or use only non-cage eggs.**

What you can do

- Encourage your supermarket to stop stocking battery eggs and using them in its products. Write and express your horror if it is continuing to stock eggs from such cruel systems.
- Write to the Secretary of State for the Department of Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, urging the government to ban all cage systems. Department for Environment, Food & Rural Affairs, Nobel House, 17 Smith Square, London SW1P 3JR.

³Research by senior economist John McInerney of Exeter University 1998 Ethics, Welfare, Law and Market Forces: the veterinary interface.



Wilberforce Way
Southwater, Horsham
West Sussex RH13 9RS
Tel: 0870 010 1181

www.rspca.org.uk

Registered charity no. 219099
We receive no government funding

Z05 9.02

COVER PHOTOS: ANDREW FORSYTH/RSPCA PHOTOLIBRARY
DESIGN: AMANDA NEE/RSPCA PUBLICATIONS