Layer hen welfare: A challenging and complex issue

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Introduction
The welfare of layer hens is a complex issue that poses a major challenge for the Australian egg industry moving forward. In a survey of all Australian egg producers conducted by AECL in 2004, animal welfare was nominated as the most important production issue impacting on the future of the industry. The elevated recognition of animal welfare is due primarily to increased pressure on the industry from animal protection groups, government regulation and growing community expectations to change farming practices and demonstrate improved welfare outcomes for layer hens.

Media representation
Within the public arena, the debate on animal welfare in relation to egg production is driven by animal protection groups that include the RSPCA, Animals Australia, Voiceless, PETA and Animal Liberation. Opinion expressed by these and other related groups dominates press attention given to the issue and is largely critical of industry management practices. This is illustrated by media trend analyses that consistently report levels of unfavourable press coverage. Of great concern to the egg industry is the often emotive, sensationalist and oversimplified nature of this coverage and the unbalanced presentation of facts regarding egg production practices. By molding public opinion, such media presentation can influence Government policy relating to animal welfare and its impact on the egg industry. While policy development in this area should be cognisant of public opinion, in order to improve welfare outcomes it is crucial that animal welfare policy be based on good science and objective assessment of management practices, rather than emotional evaluation of the subject.

Key issues
There are a number of husbandry practices employed within egg production that are the subject of contention within the context of animal welfare. These include beak trimming (to
reduce impacts of feather pecking and cannibalism), male culling, moulting and antibiotic use. Overwhelmingly however, the focus of attention leveled at the egg industry relates to the housing of layer hens in cages and the behavioural restriction associated with cage production. While welfare lobbyists (including many scientists) promote the welfare advantages of alternative housing (free range and barn) systems, it is well documented in the scientific literature that no individual housing system is superior in all indicators of poultry welfare and cage production systems offer benefits in terms of disease and injury control unmatched by alternative housing. Essentially, all housing systems employed in Australian egg production have advantages and disadvantages as it relates to welfare outcomes and the different housing systems exist primarily to provide consumers with choice when purchasing eggs.

Scientific opinion

The difficulty in assessing layer hen welfare outcomes with regards to different housing systems relates to weighting of the various measures of welfare and the fact that welfare experts often have little objective basis on which to form their opinions. The body of scientific work in this area is dominated by European researchers who use the framework of the “Five Freedoms” as a guide in the evaluation of welfare outcomes. Within this framework, most weighting is applied to the “freedom to express normal behaviour”, a position that appears underpinned by subjective evaluation and is supportive of a particular ethical viewpoint. In accepting elevated importance for the expression of a greater behavioural repertoire, the European literature often downplays the significance of other indicators of welfare that are better addressed in cage production, primarily those relating to “freedom from pain, injury and disease”.

A case-in-point is the recent LayWel project – a major research initiative funded by the European Research Programme with a general objective to evaluate the welfare of laying hens in various housing systems. The assessment undertaken by LayWel, employing a “traffic light system”, ranks risk of poor welfare on a range of indicators and rates performance against seven behavioural parameters including ability to nest, perch, dustbathe, forage and demonstrate social interaction (LayWel, 2006). In contrast, performance in terms of disease control is measured by two indicators: “infectious disease and use of therapeutic drugs”; and “mortality due to disease”. From a health/hygiene viewpoint, an expanded risk assessment to include the range of infectious diseases
responsible for serious morbidity and/or mortality would provide a very different perspective on the overall evaluation, placing conventional cages in a more favourable light.

The Australian egg industry perspective

The Australian egg industry recognises its responsibility to provide good welfare outcomes for layer hens across all systems used in commercial production. While mindful of the limitations of conventional cages in relation to behavioural expression, the industry maintains that research on welfare should be placed into context, i.e. objective versus subjective research and assessment. It is also the industry’s view that further research is required to establish the relative importance of particular behavioural needs, which must be considered in relation to physiological, health and production indicators of welfare. Most importantly, and a point often overlooked, layer hen welfare is primarily dependant on levels of stockmanship in production and the debate on layer hen welfare should not be confined simply to issues of housing systems.

AECL R&D & communications activities

As the primary services provider for the egg industry in Australia, the Australian Egg Corporation Limited (AECL) is committed to the ongoing support of research and development activities to improve animal welfare outcomes for layer hens. Between 2000 and 2008, the industry has provided in excess of $2 million to fund welfare research (eight projects) examining:

- Comparative welfare across housing systems;
- Welfare outcomes in furnished cages;
- Physiological stress assessment; and
- Improvements in moulting and beak trimming practices.

Throughout this period, AECL has also committed over $3 million on poultry health and disease management research and is a Core partner of the Australian Poultry CRC funding welfare-based research through one of three key research program areas. In addition, AECL has recently established the Hen Welfare Advisory Group (HWAG), a panel of animal welfare, veterinary and egg industry advisors that act at arms-length from AECL to provide guidance on research & communications with respect to egg production in Australia. A key communications initiative of AECL has been the recent development of
the HWAG website http://www.eggs.org.au/hen; a public information resource that aims to address the need for balanced, high-quality, scientific information on egg production and hen welfare in Australia.

References