

Egg cartons not accurate in reporting animal welfare claims

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If you think that you're using humanely produced eggs for your omelets or deviled eggs, think again. Egg companies recognize that most Americans care about the welfare of farmed animals and many market their eggs with labels claiming the hens were treated well. But a Rutgers–Camden law professor warns that many of the animal welfare claims on egg cartons aren't all that they're cracked up to be.

Sheila Rodriguez, a clinical associate professor at the Rutgers School of Law–Camden, asserts that food consumers have a right to know how farm [animals](#) are raised and, for that reason, egg producers' claims about animal welfare should be regulated by the federal government.

In a forthcoming edition of the *Temple Journal of Science, Technology & Environmental Law*, the Rutgers–Camden professor argues that egg consumers have a right to know that "[m]ost hens are packed eight or nine hens to a cage... [The cages are] so small that [hens] are unable to stretch a wing. The overcrowding causes them to fight, so their beaks are cut off to prevent them from injuring other birds. The fewer than 5% of [eggs](#) in the U.S. that are not produced under these conditions are from hens that were not even allowed outside," says Rodriguez.

In her article, "The Morally Informed Consumer: Examining Animal Welfare Claims on Egg Labels," Rodriguez contends that consumers need to understand that "'cage-free' hens are a subset of factory-farmed production. Even small farms that do not raise [hens](#) under industrial production standards purchase their birds from factory-farm hatcheries."

Animal welfare claims on egg [labels](#) should be regulated to ensure accuracy. The Rutgers–Camden professor notes that "many of the production method claims made by egg producers cannot be accurately verified. Industry standards are factory farmed standards. Federally-verified claims made under the National Organic Program, though comprehensive, are problematic because of lax enforcement."

Consumers also may be misled by such marketing claims as "natural," "no antibiotics used," and "no hormones administered," which, Rodriguez explains, have no relevance to [animal welfare](#). And while the terms "free-range" and "free-roaming" frequently appear on egg cartons, these are claims that apply to poultry, or birds raised for their meat, not to birds raised for their eggs.

Until clear and enforceable guidelines are established, Rodriguez argues, conscientious consumers should avoid purchasing most eggs.

In addition to her research on farmed animals, Rodriguez serves on the University of Pennsylvania's Institutional Animal Care and Use Committee, which oversees all research, education, and training involving animals to ensure compliance with federal law. The University of Pennsylvania appointed Rodriguez as a non-scientist to represent the outside community's interest in the humane treatment of animals.

Prior to joining the faculty at the Rutgers School of Law–Camden, Rodriguez served as Counsel for the Animal Protection Institute, now Born Free USA, a national nonprofit animal advocacy organization headquartered in Sacramento.

A Haddonfield, New Jersey resident, Rodriguez teaches courses in legal writing and animal law at the Rutgers School of Law–Camden.

Provided by Rutgers University

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