

The truth about free range eggs is tough to crack

August 6 2013, by Christine Parker

Queensland recently changed its regulation of free range eggs, lifting the number of hens allowed per hectare from 1,500 to 10,000. This is more than a six-fold increase.

Choice and animal welfare and free range farming advocates are in an uproar about the changes. Queensland "free range" no longer means free range at all, they say.

The Queensland Department of Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries [says](#) that the new figure is necessary, so that the Queensland egg industry won't be disadvantaged compared with other states.

In fact no other states have a legislated definition for free range, or minimum stocking density. The department says industry practice is to stock free range egg facilities well in excess of 1,500 birds per hectare.

So, how are we to know that our free range eggs are really free range?

Standards galore

The Primary Industries departments of all Australian state and federal governments work together to set animal welfare guidelines for [egg production](#) in the Model Code of Practice for Poultry. The latest version was agreed in 2002 and is now under review. Currently it states that free range can mean up to 1,500 birds per hectare standard, but this could

change.

The industry services body that represents producers, the Australian Egg Corporation, admitted last year that some free range egg production facilities stock up to 30 or 40,000 [hens](#) per hectare.

The Egg Corp has proposed an industry standard for free range of up to 20,000 birds per hectare. Their proposed standard was assessed by the Australian Competition and Consumer Commissioner as likely to mislead and deceive consumers.

In January 2013 supermarket giant Coles announced that it would only stock cage free eggs in its own brand range. For Coles, "free range" would mean a maximum of 10,000 hens per hectare outdoors.

The 10,000 figure was not based on any particular evidence or science. Rather it is based on a combination or balancing of what animal welfare requires, what industry say they can accomplish, and what Coles believes consumers feel they can afford based on extensive consumer research.

The new [Queensland regulation](#) is still better than other states. It set a limit on outdoor stocking density lower than the 20,000 per hectare proposed by the Egg Corp, and the currently unlimited industry practice.

It also states that production facilities can only go above 1500 up to the 10,000 if hens are moved around and the ground has 60 per cent vegetation cover.

So, what should Australia do?

The big problem with the new Queensland regulation is that it seems to accept that supermarkets in consultation with industry can ultimately decide what animal welfare practises are acceptable. In the absence of

government regulation, supermarkets decide what free range means and what choices are available to consumers.

In fact consumers who buy "free range" in supermarkets are actually buying something that would be more accurately described as "barn" or, in more Australian vernacular, "shed" laid. These hens live and eat in large crowded industrial sheds with some access to an outside ranging area that is often bare and uninteresting.

By contrast many consumers, animal welfare advocates and food activists probably think free range means eggs from hens that largely range outside in paddocks, with ground foliage and tree cover and access to an indoor area to nest and perch.

Rather than letting supermarkets and industry dictate what "free range" means in the absence of government regulation, all Australian states and territories should mandate compliance with at least the minimal [animal welfare](#) conditions in the Model Code of Practice.

They should also legislate definitions of cage, barn or shed, and free range that make it clear that what often currently counts as free range in the supermarkets is actually barn or shed with outside access, not a truly alternative free range production system.

Consumers need to recognise that the only true free range eggs currently available are premium products that cost more than supermarket brand free range eggs.

An Australian state that really wanted to help its egg industry might do more to help consumers get direct access to farmers outside of the supermarket system.

The South Australian government's recent proposal to introduce and

support its own voluntary "South Australian Free Range" with more stringent standards is a step in this direction. What a pity Queensland chose to loosen its standards rather than market its difference.

Provided by Monash University

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