

## Fact Sheet

### Commercial Free Range

- Hens are kept in a shed that has a deep litter floor and are allowed outside access.
- Hens provided with nest boxes to lay eggs.
- Code of Practice allows at least 800cm<sup>2</sup>/hen (commonly 1428cm<sup>2</sup>/hen).
- Typically manual egg collection.

### Commercial Barn

- Hens are kept in a shed that has a deep litter floor.
- Hens provided with nest boxes to lay eggs.
- Code of Practice allows at least 800cm<sup>2</sup>/hen (commonly 1428cm<sup>2</sup>/hen).
- Typically manual egg collection.

### Commercial Cage

- Hens are kept in a shed in small groups in cages (typically 2-5 hens/cage).
- Code of Practice allows at least 550cm<sup>2</sup>/hen for new cages from 2001 (5 birds per cage - more per bird if fewer in cage).
- Typically automatic egg collection.

## **DISCUSSION POINTS**

### Hen Welfare

- Important to use proven (not perceived) indicators of welfare.
- Animals should not be assigned human emotions or desires.

### Code of Practice

- The Code of Practice (Domestic Poultry) is an industry accepted standard for the welfare of hens.

### Floor Space

- The space allowances for hens are described in the Code of Practice. Barn and free range hens are allocated more space, however hens choose to crowd together. In free range system hens "... are reluctant to venture out into the open ..." (Dingle, 1998).

## Fact Sheet

### Litter

- The litter used in barn and free range systems starts as sawdust. The litter cannot be removed during lay as this frightens the hens. By the end of lay (60 weeks) the litter is approximately 90% faeces.

### Food Safety

- Eggs that have contact with faeces have a much greater risk of becoming contaminated with microorganisms such as *E. Coli* or *Salmonella*. Eggs that are laid in the litter or on the ground (as can happen in barn or free range systems) can be easily contaminated with faeces.
- Bacteria counts taken from the egg shells from a free range system can be more than 200 times higher than caged produced eggs. Barn produced eggs' bacteria counts can be 40 times higher than cage produced eggs.

### Egg Cleaning

- At the grading and distribution facility, eggs are washed prior to packing to remove any dirt or faeces. Washing removes the film around the egg which is produced during lay and makes the shells more porous. The eggs are then coated with food grade oil to reduce their shell porosity.

### Moult

- Moult is a natural process that happens to the hens during lay.

### Cannibalism

- Cannibalism is the pecking of hens by other hens until death. Pecking is a natural behaviour of hens, however cannibalism is an undesirable outcome. Hens can become aggressive and normal pecking can develop into cannibalism. Hens in small groups, such as those in cages, have a stable social order and reduced pecking. Large numbers of hens in barns and free range systems do not have a stable social order and "... an aggressive bird can do more damage to a flock in a free range system ..." (Dingle, 1998).

### References

Dingle, J., "Free range eggs provide new opportunities", *Milne's Poultry Digest*, December 1998.

Productivity Commission, "*Battery Eggs Sale and Production in the ACT*", October 1998.