

DEPARTEMENT OMGEVING

Government of Flanders

Koning Albert II-laan 20 box 8

1000 BRUSSELS

T 02 553 80 11

F 02 553 80 05

dierenwelzijn@vlaanderen.be

Flemish Council for Animal Welfare – INTERIM EVALUATION - 22/11/2017

Welfare and housing of laying hens

The Royal Order of 17 October 2005, defining the minimum standards for the protection of laying hens (Official Journal of 20.10.2005), is the transposition of Directive 1999/74/EC defining the minimum standards for the protection of laying hens. Amongst other things, this RO stipulates that, since 2012, it has not been permitted to house laying hens in classic battery cages, but only in enriched cages or non-cage systems.

During the period of 2007 - 2009, the housing of laying hens was discussed in a then federal evaluation committee. These discussions primarily focused on the question of whether enriched cages should also be banned in Belgium. At the time, the evaluation committee ruled that a ban on the installation or commissioning of cage housing for laying hens could come into force on 1.1.2025 at the earliest, providing that a number of conditions were satisfied by that date.

These conditions were as follows:

- the Belgian laying hens sector's conversion to non-cage housing systems does not lead to a competitive disadvantage for Belgian laying hen farmers with respect to laying hen farmers in other European member states.
- no cage housing systems appear to exist that guarantee an equivalent or better level of animal welfare than non-cage systems.
- the hygiene and sanitary conditions of non-cage systems appear to be no worse than those of enriched cage systems.
- the health condition of animal keepers and animals in non-cage systems is equivalent to that of enriched cage systems.

It was also decided to convene the evaluation committee every 5 years in order to assess the current state of affairs and evaluate progress.

This committee's last meeting was held in 2014. Upon the establishment of the Flemish Council for Animal Welfare, it was decided to reconvene the evaluation committee for the welfare of laying hens, this time in the form of a Council working group. This working group comprised representatives from the laying hens sector (Belgian Farmers' Union, the Vlaamse Bedrijfspluimvee- en konijnenhouders non-

profitmaking organisation, Broeiersbond and Lodewijckx), animal welfare associations (GAIA and Eurogroup for Animals), veterinarians (DEGUDAP veterinary practice) and scientists from ILVO (Institute for Agricultural and Fisheries Research), Odisee and the Poultry Farming pilot operation. The composition of this working group was discussed and approved within the Council for Animal Welfare.

The working group met four times between 24 March 2017 and 27 June 2017. During its first meeting, an overview was provided of the latest scientific literature on the housing of laying hens, as well as the current state of affairs regarding legislation in other European countries and the state of the laying hens sector in Flanders. The working group members were subsequently asked to consider potential strategies, measures or initiatives that could improve the welfare of laying hens in Flanders. Finally, each of these proposals were reviewed within the working group to determine which might obtain broad support.

According to figures from the Federal Food Agency, the number of places for laying hens in cage systems in Flanders is approximately the same as for laying hens in non-cage systems (free run, free range and organic).

Various retailers and producers are now switching or anticipate switching to eggs from non-cage systems in processed products. Delhaize is planning such a switch for its own-brand products from 2020 onwards. Such large volumes will result in changes in demand.

The Walloon minister for animal welfare has announced in a policy intention that cage systems must be eradicated from Wallonia by 2028.

As with the federal evaluation committee, there was no clear working group consensus on which housing system offers optimal animal welfare. Whilst there is little recent scientific literature pertaining to a direct comparison between these two major types of housing, both enriched cage systems and non-cage systems appear to have advantages and disadvantages. Whether or not one system is generally preferable to another depends on the significance attached to the various animal welfare aspects. This differs from person to person and, to date, there is no scientific method for objectively passing judgement on this. Behavioural freedom for laying hens is greater in non-cage systems due to the layout and greater amount of available space. Laying hens are able to exhibit more species-specific behaviour such as nesting, foraging and pecking. Selection and inspection options for laying hens are also greater in non-cage systems. On the other hand, welfare problems such as sternum injuries, feather pecking and poor air quality (e.g. fine particles and bacterial loads) are more common in non-cage systems. An added complication is that, in addition to the housing system, numerous other factors impact animal welfare including rearing conditions, management and hybrid selection.

Although neither systems are problem-free, there appears to be a greater discrepancy between the potential and actual animal welfare levels in non-cage systems in comparison to enriched cages. The LAYERHOUSE study revealed that there are considerable problems at Belgian laying hen companies with an aviary system (these are 'modern' non-cage systems in which the hens can spread out in the barn across various floors), such as sternum and foot pad disorders, feather pecking and cannibalism, and dust concentration. However, the mortality rate appears to have dropped to a level that is (almost) comparable to the mortality rate in enriched cages. The large variation between companies in the prevention of these problems suggests that further optimisation is both necessary and feasible. The key to this is likely improved coordination between the housing, management and animals themselves (rearing and genetics).

There is little new information from which it could be concluded that the conditions comply with those specified in the 2009 federal advice for achieving a ban on cage housing. No working group

consensus was found for revising these conditions¹. The 2009 opinion consequently remains unchanged.

The Flemish Council for Animal Welfare recognises that it is imperative measures are taken to improve the welfare of laying hens in general and proposes the following actions:

- The establishment of poultry farmer network groups in collaboration with the sector: these participatory action groups, in which poultry farmers, supported by a professional facilitator, take the lead in exchanging experiences and jointly looking for improvements, both per housing system and per subject (e.g. on the control of bird mite or the prevention of feather pecking).
- Scientific research into improvements in non-cage systems where the level of animal welfare at operating companies is likely to improve the most, should be promoted as a priority.
- The establishment of a fast and cost-effective monitoring system in collaboration with the sector, which measures the welfare of laying hens at the abattoir and provides feedback to poultry farmers and any other responsible persons (e.g. hauliers, abattoir). Experiences from other EU countries demonstrate that such 'benchmarking systems' are highly effective in considerably improving the welfare of farm animals in a short period of time, particularly if they are linked to a reward and/or sanction for (repeatedly) achieving good or bad results.

The evaluation committee for the housing of laying hens typically meets every five years. The Council has requested that this consultation be held every 2 years in the run-up to the phasing out scenario from 2025 onwards.

¹ However, GAIA and Eurogroup for Animals are strongly insisting on a full review of the conditions as specified in the 2009 federal opinion, since, as currently formulated, they maintain the status quo and prevent the constructive transition to cage-free laying hen farms in Flanders.