



The Egg Business

Laying Hens

There are more than 325 million egg laying hens in the U.S. confined in battery cages — small wire cages stacked in tiers and lined up in rows inside huge warehouses. In accordance with the USDA's recommendation to give each hen four inches of 'feeder space,' hens are commonly packed four to a cage measuring just 16 inches wide. In this tiny space, the birds cannot stretch their wings or legs, and they cannot fulfill normal behavioral patterns or social needs. Constantly rubbing against the wire cages, they suffer from severe feather loss, and their bodies are covered with bruises and abrasions.

In order to reduce injuries resulting from excessive pecking — an aberrant behavior that occurs when the confined hens are bored and frustrated — practically all laying hens have part of their beaks cut off. Debeaking is a painful procedure that involves cutting through bone, cartilage, and soft tissue.

Laying more than 250 eggs per year each, laying hens' bodies are severely taxed. They suffer from "fatty liver syndrome" when their liver cells, which work overtime to produce the fat and protein for egg yolks, accumulate extra fat. They also suffer from what the industry calls 'cage layer fatigue,' and many become 'egg bound' and die when their bodies are too weak to pass another egg.

Osteoporosis is another common ailment afflicting egg laying hens, whose bodies lose more calcium to form egg shells than they can assimilate from their diets. One industry journal, *Feedstuffs*, explains, "...the laying hen at peak eggshell cannot absorb enough calcium from her diet..." while another (*Lancaster Farming*) states, "... a hen will use a quantity of calcium for yearly egg production that is greater than her entire skeleton by 30-fold or more." Inadequate calcium contributes to broken bones, paralysis, and death.

After one year in egg production, the birds are classified as 'spent hens' and are sent off to slaughter. Their brittle, calcium-depleted bones often shatter during handling or at the slaughterhouse. They usually end up in soups, pot pies, or similar low-grade chicken meat products in which their bodies can be shredded to hide the bruises from consumers.

With a growing supply of broiler chickens keeping slaughterhouses busy, egg producers have had to find new ways to dispose of spent hens. One entrepreneur has developed the 'Jet-Pro' system to turn spent hens into animal feed. As described in *Feedstuffs*, "Company trucks would enter layer operations, pick up the birds, and grind them up, on

site, in a portable grinder... it (the ground up hens) would go to Jet-Pro's new extruder-texturizer, the 'Pellet Pro.'"

In one notorious case of extraordinary cruelty at Ward Egg Ranch in February 2003 in San Diego County, California, more than 15,000 spent laying hens were tossed alive into a wood-chipping machine to dispose of them. Despite tremendous outcry from a horrified public, the district attorney declined to prosecute the owners of the egg farm, calling the use of a wood-chipper to kill hens a "common industry practice."

In some cases, especially if the cost of replacement hens is high, laying hens may be 'force molted' to extend their laying capacity. This process involves starving the hens for up to 18 days, keeping them in the dark, and denying them water to shock their bodies into another egg-laying cycle. Commonly, between 5 and 10% of birds die during the molt, and those who live may lose more than 25% of their body weight.

For every egg-laying hen confined in a battery cage, there is a male chick who was killed at the hatchery. Because egg-laying chicken breeds have been genetically selected exclusively for maximum egg production, they don't grow fast or large enough to be raised profitably for meat. Therefore, male chicks of egg-laying breeds are of no economic value, and they are literally discarded on the day they hatch — usually by the cheapest, most convenient means available. Thrown into trash cans by the thousands, male chicks suffocate or are crushed under the weight of others.

Another common method of disposing of unwanted male chicks is grinding them up alive. This can result in unspeakable horrors, as described by one research scientist who observed that "even after twenty seconds, there were only partly damaged animals with whole skulls". In other words, fully conscious chicks were partially ground up and left to slowly and agonizingly die. Eyewitness accounts at commercial hatcheries indicate similar horrors of chicks being slowly dismembered by machinery blades en route to trash bins or manure spreaders.