



February 7, 2012

Bill to protect hens deserves support

Plan mandates larger cages for egg-laying birds

Americans care how their food is produced. They want animals treated humanely and farmers treated fairly.

A bill in Congress, sponsored by Oregon Rep. Kurt Schrader, would bring that humane, fair treatment to egg production in the U.S. It deserves Congress', and Americans', hearty support.

H.R. 3798 has the backing of the United Egg Producers, which represents 88 percent of the nation's egg industry, and the Humane Society of the United States, an organization that lobbies aggressively for animal-welfare regulations. The groups are longtime adversaries, in Oregon as well as nationally, but they worked out a compromise that's good for egg-laying hens, producers and consumers.

The one wrinkle is that the agreement between the two sides could expire June 30 unless Congress approves the legislation by then.

Called The Egg Products Inspection Act Amendments of 2012, the bill would update the federal egg legislation passed in 1970. H.R. 3798 has bipartisan backing. It includes provisions that:

- Give egg producers 15 to 18 years to provide new cages for hens.

Currently, most egg-laying hens have 67 square inches of space or less. That's smaller than a standard 8 1/2 -by-11 piece of paper!

The bill would require at least 124 square inches for white hens and 144 for brown hens. In addition, hens would have perches, nesting boxes and scratching areas so they could engage in natural behaviors.

- Require labeling of egg cartons, informing consumers whether they are buying "eggs from caged hens," "eggs from hens in enriched cages," "eggs from cage-free hens" or "eggs from free-range hens."

- Eventually ban the sale or transport, nationwide, of eggs that don't meet the bill's standards.

Opponents argue that the size of hen cages is none of government's business. Or that this legislation

would impose unreasonable costs on producers, and ultimately consumers. Or that it's an unwelcome precedent, one step on the slippery slope toward banning animal agriculture.

But those are tired arguments. Federal regulation of eggs, and other agricultural products, is not new. Most people in the egg industry want this updated legislation because it sets a uniform playing field for everyone instead of having states develop their own standards, as the Oregon Legislature did last year.

Furthermore, evidence suggests that hens' egg production increases at farms that have installed the new cages.

The legislation exemplifies how traditional adversaries can put aside their distrust and work together for each side's mutual benefit. As lead sponsor, Schrader deserves credit for his role on H.R. 3798.

Congress should pass it. Soon.