

AN HSUS REPORT: Undercover Exposés at the Second- and Third-Largest U.S. Egg Producers Highlight Need for Industry Wide Reform

In February and March 2010, The HSUS conducted undercover investigations at four egg factory farms in Iowa, owned by two of the nation's largest egg producers: Rose Acre Farms (the second-largest U.S. egg producer) and Rembrandt Enterprises (the third-largest U.S. egg producer). The combined evidence from these investigations shows compelling evidence of the inherent and extreme abuse associated with battery cage egg production, as well as the urgent need for reform within the U.S. egg industry. This is not a matter of a few rotten eggs, but rather practices that are simply rotten.

ROSE ACRE FARMS INVESTIGATION:

Approximately 3.92 million laying hens and 1 million young hens (pullets) are confined in cages at the three Rose Acre facilities where the HSUS investigator worked (in Winterset, Stuart and Guthrie Center, Iowa). At the Guthrie Center location, 2.24 million hens are confined in battery cages stacked eight levels high. At the Stuart and Winterset locations, battery cages are stacked four levels high.

Rose Acre Farms' Web site states: "All Rose Acre Farms hens are cared for to make sure all hens are happy at all times." However, our investigation found that most hens at the company's battery cage facilities are forced to endure miserable conditions. For example:

- **Broken bones:** Workers roughly yank young hens (pullets) from their cages in the growing sheds and load them into mobile cages for transport to battery cages. Workers are required to stuff 14 hens in each small cage on the mobile rack, resulting in a mass of twisted bodies. The hens are trucked up to an hour in such conditions to the company's other locations.
- **Cruel, extremely rough handling:** The HSUS investigator videotaped workers pulling young hens from the mobile cages by any available body part and stuffing them into battery cages.
- **Cruel depopulation methods:** Workers grabbed



spent hens and stuffed them into gassing carts. The HSUS investigator documented workers grabbing hens by their legs until they could hold no more, then cramming them into the units where they're killed with CO₂.

- **Prolapsed uteruses:** Hens in intensive laying facilities often suffer from “blow-outs” (when the uterus collapses and protrudes from the body) that go unnoticed and untreated due to the cage crowding.
- **Trapped birds unable to reach food and water:** Battery cages can trap hens by their wings, necks, legs, and feet in the wire, causing other birds to trample the weakened animals, usually resulting in a slow, painful death.
- **High mortality in layer and pullet sheds:** The HSUS investigator working in the Winterset pullet sheds pulled dead young hens, some of them mummified (meaning they'd been rotting in the cages for weeks), from cages every day.
- **Failure to maintain manure pits:** According to one worker, the manure pit under a pullet shed had not been cleaned in two years. The ammonia levels caused the investigator respiratory distress despite the painter's face mask he wore. Rose Acre workers claimed that some hens are blinded because of excessive ammonia levels.
- **Abandoned hens:** Some hens manage to escape from their cages and fall into the manure pits below.

REMBRANDT ENTERPRISES INVESTIGATION:

About 5.4 million hens are confined in 18 battery cage sheds, each holding about 300,000 animals, at Rembrandt's Thompson, Iowa location. Our findings included the following examples of abuse:

- **Injuries from overcrowding:** Rembrandt confines six to seven hens in each battery cage. Smaller or weaker hens are often trampled by others.
- **Trapped hens:** Hens' wings, necks, legs and feet become entangled in cage wires, often resulting in trampling by other hens, and death by starvation and dehydration.
- **Broken bones:** Workers sometimes slam battery cage doors shut on birds' wings, legs, and necks, causing broken bones.
- **High mortality:** During his first two days on the job, the HSUS investigator pulled scores of decomposed and mummified hen carcasses that were obviously weeks old.
- **Eye and beak infections:** The HSUS investigator videotaped hens with abscesses that caused their eyes to close and beaks and mouths to swell. He was told that he should do nothing about the birds' conditions.
- **Prolapses:** The HSUS investigator pulled many dead hens from cages who had obviously suffered uterine prolapses. One live hen's prolapse became caught in the cage floor.
- **Failure to euthanize:** Sick and injured hens were often put back into their cages instead of being euthanized.
- **Abandoned hens:** The HSUS investigator found starving hens in manure pits.
- **Lengthy transport:** Rembrandt does not kill “spent” hens on site but rather trucks them to a Minnesota slaughter plant. As a result, the birds are violently yanked from their battery cages, confined in mobile cages, and trucked to the plant.



The investigations' similar findings demonstrate that the extreme confinement entailed in battery cages is inherently inhumane. As investigation after investigation has shown, this cruelty is pervasive throughout the entire battery cage egg industry. It's time for an end to cage confinement of laying hens and a switch to higher welfare, higher food safety, cage-free egg systems.



ROSE ACRE AND REMBRANDT PROBLEMS ARE SYSTEMIC:

An estimated 95% of the 280 million egg-laying hens in the U.S. are confined in cages.¹ The severe animal welfare problems documented at Rose Acre Farms and Rembrandt Enterprises occurred because—as published research shows—this type of extreme confinement is inherently flawed. For example, the LayWel study – which is the most extensive scientific study into laying hen welfare ever conducted – concluded that battery cages are the only method of housing hens that, **under no circumstances**, can provide even “satisfactory welfare” for animals.² The LayWel study involved working groups in seven European countries, funding from the European Commission and data from 230 different flocks of hens. Similarly, the *Netherlands Journal of Agricultural Science* published a study that ranked 22 different methods of housing hens in terms of animal welfare on a zero-to-ten scale. **Battery cages ranked 0.0** – literally as low as possible. Typical U.S. cage-free egg production systems ranked significantly higher, around 5.9.³ Additionally, the prestigious Pew Commission on Industrial Farm Animal Production also studied the impact of battery cages on birds’ welfare and concluded that battery cages should be eliminated.⁴ The Commission was funded by the Pew Charitable Trusts and Johns Hopkins School of Public Health; it was chaired by the former Governor of Kansas and included scientists, veterinarians and the former U.S. Secretary of Agriculture.

These studies are not surprising, considering that battery cages restrict many natural behaviors that are critical to birds’ welfare. Domesticated animals largely retain the basic behavioral repertoire of their wild counterparts.⁵⁶ Although selective breeding over thousands of years has altered animals in some ways, natural selection has had a much stronger influence in shaping animal behavior over hundreds of thousands, if not millions, of years. Some behavior is so deeply engrained in the animals’ genetic makeup that it will persist even in environments that no longer require that behavior for survival. Colloquially, this type of behavior is known as instinct, but ethologists (scientists who specialize in the study of animal behavior) describe it in terms of motivation and behavioral needs—

¹ United Egg Producers. 2008. United Egg Producers Animal Husbandry Guidelines for U.S. Egg Laying Flocks, 2008 Edition (Alpharetta, GA: United Egg Producers). www.uepcertified.com/media/pdf/UEP-Animal-Welfare-Guidelines.pdf. Accessed June 18, 2009.

² LayWel. 2006. Welfare implications of changes in production systems for laying hens. www.laywel.eu/web/pdf/deliverable%2071%20welfare%20assessment.pdf. Accessed March 25, 2008.

³ http://3.bp.blogspot.com/_tYXCvxw2ygk/SkElqgDZIDI/AAAAAAAAAO0/7r9bf8aE5kM/s1600-h/hen+welfare.bmp

⁴ The Pew Commission on Industrial Farm Animal Production. 2008. Putting meat on the table: industrial farm animal production in America. www.pewtrusts.org/uploadedFiles/wwwpewtrustsorg/Reports/Industrial_Agriculture/PCIFAP_FINAL.pdf. Accessed May 16, 2008.

⁵ Fraser AF and Broom DM. 1990. Farm Animal Behaviour and Welfare, 3rd Edition (London, England: Bailliere Tindall, p. vii).

⁶ Price EO. 1984. Behavioral aspects of animal domestication. *The Quarterly Review of Biology* 59(1):1-32.

strongly motivated behavior controlled largely by internal factors (such as changes in hormone levels) that are present no matter what type of external environment is provided.⁷

Artificial confinement environments like battery cages often prevent the expressions of natural behaviors, including many that are behavioral needs. Behavior identified as important for the well-being of hens, includes nesting, perching and roosting, scratching and foraging, dustbathing, engaging in comfort behavior (such as wing-flapping and preening), and exploring. Just as they are not able to move freely, hens confined in battery cages are denied the ability to engage in these types of behaviors.

CAGE-FREE EGG PRODUCTION OFFERS MANY IMPROVEMENTS AND IS GROWING:

The welfare of hens can be significantly improved simply by removing them from cages and allowing them freedom of movement and the ability to engage in some natural behaviors (e.g. nesting, perching and foraging). Fortunately, cage-free egg production is starting to replace cage confinement systems in the U.S.

The **European Union** outlawed barren battery cages (effective 2012). In the U.S., **California** criminalized the practice of caging hens (effective 2015) and **Michigan** also outlawed the use of cages (effective 2019). These laws make sense considering the public support for animal welfare. For example: an **American Farm Bureau**-funded study found that 95 percent of Americans think farm animals should be well cared for⁸; a study by the food industry consulting firm **Technomic** found that animal welfare is the *third most-important social issue* to American restaurant patrons⁹; and a **Parade magazine** study found that animal welfare is the fourth most-popular social cause in America.¹⁰ As Cardinal, Pope Benedict XVI called the confinement of egg-laying hens in cages a contradiction of Biblical principles.¹¹

Numerous corporations are following this trend by incorporating cage-free eggs into their supply chains. In fact, a 2007 *New York Times* article called cage-free eggs the food industry's "latest have-to-have it product." Now, most of America's largest restaurant chains are moving toward cage-free eggs, including **Burger King, Subway, Wendy's, Denny's, IHOP, Sonic, Starbucks, Red Robin, Carl's Jr., Hardee's & Quiznos**. Supermarket chains are also getting on board: All **Wal-Mart** and **Costco** private brand eggs are cage-free, and **Safeway, Harris Teeter & Winn-Dixie** have policies to increase their cage-free egg sales. Food production giant, Unilever, recently announced that it will switch 100% of the 350 million eggs it uses each year for **Hellmann's** mayonnaise to cage-free.¹² Additionally, **Compass Group** (the world's largest foodservice provider) has switched the 100 million whole eggs it uses each year to cage-free egg and its competitors (e.g. **Guckenheimer, ARAMARK, Guest Services, Seasons Culinary** and **Parkhurst**) have eliminated or reduced their use of cage eggs. Lastly, a recent report from the prestigious Sustainable Endowments Institute found that **64% of universities** polled reported using cage-free eggs¹³ and many **major corporate and government cafeterias** – including the cafeterias at the U.S. House of Representative and Senate, NASA and the National Institutes of Health – now use cage-free eggs.

For more information about this issue, visit: www.humanesociety.org.

⁷ Duncan IJ. 1998. Behavior and behavioral needs. *Poultry Science* 77(12):1766-72.

⁸ Jayson Lusk, F. Bailey Norwood and Robert Prickett, "Consumer Preferences for Farm Animal Welfare: Results of a Nationwide Telephone Survey." Oklahoma State University. August 17, 2007. ii.

⁹ Technomic Information Services. Future Food Trends. Issue No. 3, 2007. 2.

¹⁰ Michael Berland, "Compassion Counts More than Ever." *Parade magazine*. March 7, 2010.

¹¹ Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger. God and the World: A Conversation with Peter Seewald. (Ignatius Press, 2002) 78-79.

¹² PR Newswire. Hellmann's Launches New Light Recipe With 'Cage-Free' Eggs.

www.prnewswire.com/news-releases/hellmannsr-launches-new-light-recipe-with-cage-free-eggs-85190977.html. Accessed April 6, 2010.

¹³ Sustainable Endowments Institute. The College Sustainability Report Card. www.greenreportcard.org/. Accessed April 6, 2010.