

Development of the Model Code of Practice for the Welfare of Animals – Domestic Poultry 4th Edition

A review of the Code is long overdue. When the current version was approved by the Primary Industries Ministerial Council and printed in 2002, it was scheduled for review in 2010. It was a development of an earlier version of the Model Code. Now that a review is being undertaken, it is essential for the free range sector of the egg industry to ensure that the Australian Egg Corporation Ltd. is not successful with its plans for intensive production standards to be adopted in place of the extensive requirements of the current code. The withdrawal of its application for a certification trade mark for Egg Standards Australia was a great victory for egg producers and consumers.

There was no science behind the free range stocking density proposals put forward by AECL and there has been no scientific review of production processes to demonstrate that the standards contained within the current Model Code are no longer applicable to the industry.

The stocking density of 1500 hens per hectare for free range hens was developed by applying well established principles of agronomy. The issue of the upper limit on the long term stocking rate was debated strongly at the time, following pressure from local Councils and the EPA about how some farms were operating.

The experience of people who had farmed free range layers in the 1950's and 60's, when egg production was based on free range hens often run under citrus trees, was that for an operation to be sustainable, the stocking rate had to be low - less than 300 birds/acre (750/hectare). It was agreed that system should be regarded as Free Range egg production and the hens were to have access to the range during daylight hours. There was some dispute by new entrants to the industry who believed that they could design pasture rotation systems around their sheds that would allow higher rates.

So it was decided to take an empirical approach and work out what the maximum stocking rate could be to avoid the measurable negative impacts of nutrient run off and soil degradation and still be theoretically possible to maintain pasture cover and avoid the issue of dust.

Some argued that as most hens were in sheds at night and may be locked in for part of the day so that only a portion of the hens actually entered the range area, the impact is lessened.

The dairy industry was very big at that time and local agronomists had data on the effects of applying very high rates of poultry manure on irrigated pasture. The agronomists studied the data on the maximum nutrient uptake a well maintained irrigated pasture could support and also avoid the problems of salinity build up observed in the dairy pastures. The stocking rate was calculated and a stocking density of up to 600 birds/acre (1500/hectare) was regarded as the maximum possible for long term sustainability.

At the time the Code was approved, it was accepted that to maintain consumer credibility, visitors or passers-by had to see the birds out and about on the range. It was also accepted that there is no valid animal management need to lock in the layers in the morning or during inclement weather.

Those currently involved in free range egg production agree that the fundamental elements of the Model Code, or other regulations introduced by Governments must be:

- › a maximum stocking density of 1500 hens per hectare;
- › stocking density must be reduced in conditions where pasture or other vegetative cover cannot be maintained at the maximum stocking density;
- › no beak trimming of hens is permitted except when other methods of controlling outbreaks of severe feather pecking or cannibalism have been tried and failed (using the same criteria in the current Model Code); and
- › pullets must be allowed to range freely once they are fully feathered (about six weeks old).