

ACCC blocks Egg Corp plans to destroy family farms

A preliminary decision by the Australian Competition and Consumer Commission has been welcomed by Phil Westwood of Freeranger Eggs in South Gippsland.

The ACCC says it plans to reject AECL's application for a trade mark for new standards for egg producers as it did not believe they would meet consumer expectations.

Standards proposed by the Australian Egg Corporation were designed to deceive consumers and boost the profits of corporate egg businesses, while decimating family farms across the country.

It would have allowed intensive operations running up to 20,000 hens per hectare to classify their facilities as free range, providing unfair competition for farms which meet the currently accepted industry maximum standard of 1500 hens per hectare.

This decision demonstrates the strength of opposition to the Egg Corporation's plans from within the industry and is likely to spark strong debate at the Egg Corp's annual meeting in Sydney on November 29.

The ACCC received a flood of objections to the proposed new standards from consumers as well as from egg farmers. There was a very successful coalition of interests led by Phil Westwood as national President of the Free Range Egg & Poultry Association of Australia. It included animal welfare groups RSPCA, Humane Society International, Voiceless and Animals Australia as well as the consumer advocacy group Choice.

The volume of submissions demonstrated total opposition to the proposed standards. Of 1700 direct submission, only 7 supported the AECL plan.

Most of the proposed standards were acceptable to the industry and simply reflected existing production methods. But the purpose of several of the standards which related specifically to the free range sector of the industry, was to allow intensive production facilities to label the eggs they produced as free range in order to obtain a price premium from unsuspecting consumers. They did not make sense in terms of good animal husbandry, farm sustainability or in meeting consumer expectations.

The fundamental elements of the proposals allowed a maximum stocking density of up to 2 hens per square metre (20,000 hens per hectare), to keep young hens locked in sheds until they were about 25 weeks old (even though they usually start laying at 16 - 20 weeks of age), to have no restrictions on the beak trimming of hens and to keep the hens locked up if the weather is too hot, too windy, too wet or in any other way 'adverse'.

The main impacts of the new standards, if introduced by the Egg Corp, would have been serious implications for farm sustainability, truth in labelling, consumer expectations, unfair competition within the industry and issues of animal welfare.

The proposed Egg Standards Australia ignored many of the provisions in the current [Model Code](#) which sets the maximum stocking density on free range farms at 1500 hens per hectare (as confirmed by legal opinion), beak trimming is prohibited unless other methods or addressing feather pecking and cannibalism problems have been tried and failed, (such as appropriate selection of more docile strains of laying hens, reducing stocking density, better lighting management and feed control) and the hens **must** be allowed access to the outdoors once they are fully feathered (at about six weeks old).

There are no standards anywhere in the world that came close to the stocking density proposed by the Egg Corporation and there is research (ignored by AECL) which shows that it is unnecessary to trim the beaks of chickens.

The interim decision by the ACCC followed various examples of egg substitution. A South Australian producer was fined for labelling cage eggs as free range. A NSW producer was caught out selling barn laid eggs as free range and in Victoria a free range farmer has been found to be importing non-accredited eggs from Queensland and selling them to unsuspecting consumers as eggs accredited to Victorian standards.

Contrary to false assertions made by the Egg Corporation, the Model Code **does** set a maximum stocking density. 1500 hens per hectare is specified as the maximum for laying hens, although an item quoted by AECL from the Appendix to the Code, does allow a higher density for meat birds. When it claims that a higher density is permitted for egg laying hens, what the Egg Corp carefully ignores are the words in the same Appendix '**When meat chickens use only some weeks of the 10 week cycle on pasture, a proportionately higher stocking density than for layers may be used.**'

Once the ACCC handed down its interim decision, the Australian Egg Corporation backed off, withdrew the Egg Standards Australia application and waited for Coles to come up with its 10,000 hens per hectare 'free range' plan.

Phil Westwood

Freeranger Eggs