

Accreditation systems are a farce

Freeranger Eggs is currently not involved with any industry accreditation body other than the Victorian Farmers Markets' Association. We are registered as a free range egg farm with our Council, Bass Coast Shire and with the Department of Environment and Primary Industries.

Until June 30 this year, we were members of (and accredited by) the Free Range Farmers Association. But we chose not to renew our membership as the association failed to uphold and maintain its own standards and had failed to conduct farm inspections during the year (which is about the only significant cost to the Association and is the only benefit for members).

We also had a partnered accreditation agreement with Humane Choice. But with the actions of the committee of the Free Range Farmers Association in destroying the credibility of FRFA, that agreement has lapsed even though it was set to run until next November. Verna Simpson, the CEO of the Humane Society International which operates the Humane Choice program has sent us this invitation: "As FRFA does not seem to be continuing as a certification body you are welcome to become a full HC farm. Your farm is what free range farming is all about and you would obviously have no trouble meeting our audit requirements."

The problems erupted over the re-accreditation by the FRFA committee of a farm which breached the Association's standards by packaging eggs from non-accredited sources (egg substitution) and not taking action against farms which used pelleted feed containing colouring additives. The use of manufactured colouring additives was specifically banned by the FRFA standards.

There is no accreditation body in Australia which meets the standards we have maintained on the Freeranger Eggs farm which cover food safety, land sustainability and animal welfare.

Some of the egg accreditation organisations are formally recognised by Governments – but some are not. Here's brief view of the accreditation systems currently around in Victoria.

Egg Corp Assured – Allows beak trimming and unlimited stocking densities in sheds or range areas – 40,000 hens per hectare or more. No restrictions on the inclusion of same species meat meal or colouring additives in feed.

RSPCA - Not interested in accrediting small producers. Allows beak trimming and outdoor stocking densities of up to 2500 hens per hectare. It seems there are no restrictions on feed or colouring additives.

Humane Choice – Does not allow beak trimming. Maximum stocking density of 1500 hens per hectare. Allows colouring additives. Does not allow the use of same species in meat meal used in hen rations.

Free Range Egg and Poultry Australia Ltd – Allows beak trimming. Stocking densities appear to be variable. No restrictions on feed.

Free Range Farmers Association – Does not allow beak trimming. Limits stocking density to 750 hens per hectare (but committee members have said they want to increase the numbers to 1500). Now allows manufactured colouring additives in the feed ration. Allows meat meal in the feed (which may be derived from poultry).

Organic certification - This is probably the closest to the standards we have at Freeranger Eggs. But at least one of the certification bodies (NASAA) allows manufactured colouring additives in the chook food.