

Protection of animals: laying hens in systems of rearing (repl. direct. 88/166/EEC). Communication included

1998/0092(CNS) - 08/01/2008 - Follow-up document

The Commission presented a Communication on the various systems of rearing laying hens, in particular those covered by Directive 1999/74/EC.

Animal welfare is a core value for EU citizens who seem particularly concerned about the welfare of farmed poultry and, in particular, of laying hens. By Council Directive 1999/74/EC, Member States agreed on various measures laying down minimum standards for the protection of laying hens, with a staged implementation of some provisions over a time period extending to 2012 taking into account the economic impact of the measure.

The main **conclusions** of the document are as follows:

- Most Member States correctly transposed Directive 1999/74/EC. However, in most Member States, producers have made very little progress in introducing enriched cages or shifting toward alternative systems. Nevertheless, the Commission is informed that major retailers in several Member States are developing marketing strategies for eggs produced in alternative systems;
- Studies have shown that the animal health problems occurring in alternative systems can mainly be minimised or even solved by a proper management or suitable design;
- Enriched cages improve the welfare of the animals in comparison with unenriched cage systems and further optimisation seems possible in the future. In contrast, the unenriched cages cause several animal welfare problems that are inherent to the systems. Further research is, and will continue to need to be performed to assess the extent to which rearing systems for laying hens *inter alia* provide optimal standards of animal health and welfare as well as food safety;
- Inspections have shown that several Member States have problems with the correct implementation of Directive 1999/74/EC. The Commission will intensely monitor the development by performing further FVO missions and act by ensuring an appropriate follow-up of FVO missions;
- The estimation on consumption trends in significant EU 15 Member States reports a regular increase of consumption of table eggs from non-cage systems;
- Clear information to consumers is the key to allow producers to market eggs from welfare friendly rearing systems (it should be noted that processed eggs, unlike table eggs, are currently not submitted to any legislative requirement for welfare related labelling);
- Certain retailers and food service operators are marketing predominantly non-caged eggs. Any postponement of the ban on unenriched cages would distort competition and penalise those producers who have today already invested in alternative or enriched cage systems that stand for scientific and technological development.

The Communication makes the following **recommendations**:

1) In order to improve competitiveness, high animal welfare standards applied in the EU, including for laying hens, should be promoted as a marketing and competitive advantage at European level using mechanisms such as, in particular:

- Raising awareness in both the public and private sector, to give priority to the support of scientific investments, information and education in this area;
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Promoting information campaigns on the rearing systems in the framework given by the marketing standards for eggs;

- Ensuring cooperation between stakeholders across the supply chain (e.g. producers, processors, retailers, caterers, consumers, governments, NGOs);
- Examining the possibility of the creation of a general EU framework to allow animal welfare labelling on the basis of welfare indicators and certification schemes valid at European level.

2) The communication to consumers on high animal welfare standards applied in the laying hen sector should include objective information on:

- The production methods applied;
- The fact that implementing higher animal welfare standards could incur extra costs for producers;
- The impact of improved animal welfare standards on egg prices.

3) Consumers should be assured that they buy eggs produced in compliance with European values. Farmers could be rewarded for producing premium quality products which are distinguishable from others and therefore benefit from a price premium.

4) As for the change to new husbandry systems in relation to the CAP, it is not recommended to amend the current provisions of Directive 1999/74/EC. However:

- The change to new husbandry systems has to be further supported both from the technical and economic side;
- The relevance of CAP and in particular rural development policies to the laying hen sector should be analysed and be made more visible, including support for investments in agricultural holdings or the processing and marketing of agricultural products which aim to improve animal welfare.

5) Further research should be promoted and prioritised to optimise systems for the rearing of laying hens and to minimise health and welfare problems linked to genetic selection. Further research on non-cage systems if they are profitable should also be promoted.

6) Lastly, the role of animal welfare in the sustainability strategy should be assessed further.