Consumer Research on Enriched Colonies

The Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry (MAF) has released a discussion paper on the welfare of laying hens. It provides for the phasing out of conventional cages and the introduction of a new housing method called Enriched Colonies.

To understand what impact method of housing hens has on people’s purchase decisions, an independent research project was carried out by Qzone in 2010. Qzone is an independent qualitative research and marketing company in New Zealand.

Here is a summary of what Qzone has found:

- A third of the market says that the method of housing affects their egg purchase choices. Another third says it can have some affect but other considerations are more important. A further third says that housing method does not affect their purchase at all.

- By and large there is a very positive reaction to the Enriched Colony housing method. It is widely seen as a move in the right direction.

- Acceptance and preference for the Colony option comes from right across the egg-buying spectrum.

- Some people who currently “reject cage eggs” do not reject Enriched Colony eggs.

- Existing moderate cage egg users expressed a desire to purchase eggs from other housing systems but were constrained by the household budget.

- Price will have an effect. While many shoppers express some flexibility on price; around 22% express zero or little tolerance for a price increase. They are the high volume caged-egg buyers.

- The move from cage to Colonies draws widespread support while around one sixth of the market, the real price-driven end, say they’d be uncomfortable with a price of, say $3.95 per dozen (a move of 50 cents above regular cage eggs).
In the section below the perceptions identified through the research of egg users are reported.

Source: Qzone – "Feedback on Housing Hens"
What People Think

Cage
- Hens in a cage – some believe it’s one hen per cage
- Often referred to as battery hens
- Confined & cramped conditions
  - No way for hen to move
  - Overcrowded environment
  - No daylight or fresh air
  - Artificial light 24/7
- Beaks & wings clipped
- Can’t perform natural behaviour
  - Stressed hen = stressed egg
- Eggs rolled on tray to collect
  - Unhealthy egg
- Leads to disease & short life
- Cruel environment for hens

Cage Free
- Most perceive it as not in a cage
  - May be in barn or enclosure
- Not battery hen environment
- Might be free to roam indoors
- Hen is able to live more normal life
  - Happier hen

Unfamiliar term & uncertainty

Organic
- Fed organic food – likely GE free
  - No hormones or medications
  - No pesticides or chemicals
  - No additives or preservatives
- Likely to be free Range space
  - Healthy feed = healthy hen
  - Likely the most expensive egg

Feed is key difference & focus

Barn
- Most believe restricted in barn
  - Free to roam within barn
- Some perceive enclosures within a barn structure
  - No natural light / outdoor access
  - Limited space to move or roam
  - Maybe sneaky way to avoid ‘cage’
  - Diet is controlled & monitored
- Kept indoors & without natural light 24/7
  - No predators – shelter for hen
  - A few see it as larger hen house with access out of barn

Free Range
- Free to roam outdoors is most frequent understanding
  - Some believe roam in/outdoors
- Have freedom to scratch, eat grass & enjoy fresh air
  - Natural uncrowded environment
- Eggs laid anywhere – mixed size
  - Likely to be paddocks
- Food may be supplemented
  - A few point out exposed to predators & bad weather
- No stress = happy hen = healthier egg for consumption

While word is familiar, people are unclear how it impacts hens

Feel this is best for hen yet also have to pay higher price
These are interesting thoughts, but here are the facts...

- The average number of birds in current/conventional cages is 5 so the cage is a minimum size of 2500 square cm.
- Lighting must be provided for hens who do not have access to daylight e.g. barn and cage, for a minimum of 8 hours and a maximum of 16 hours in each 24 hours.
- Wings are not clipped.
- Beaks may be trimmed at day old using an infra read beam. It is used in all systems, cage, free range and barn.
- Birds in cage system have less disease and lower mortality than other systems.
- No hormones are used in cage, barn, free range or organic system. In fact, hormones are banned for use in New Zealand poultry meat or eggs.
- Feed for all housing systems are subjected to government regulation.
- New Zealand eggs from all systems are amongst the world’s best – no salmonella ever found inside a New Zealand egg.
- All New Zealand eggs are healthy eggs.

Furnished Colony

Response to concept...

- It’s an improvement – step forward
  - Better that industry is thinking
  - Birds/animals deserve respect
  - Helps take guilt out of cage eggs
  - Improves egg industry image
  - Furnishings that are better for hen

- It’s still a cage – with a fancy name
  - Unnatural & unhealthy place
  - Prefer healthier conditions
  - Unclear what conditions are like
  - What is stress level for hen?
  - Does it produce healthier egg?
  - Are welfare standards sufficient?
  - What loopholes will be exploited?
  - Is compliance enforced on farmers?
  - Still no access to outdoors

View on pricing...

- Heavy & Medium Egg Buyers prefer pricing at $4 - $4.50. However $5 is unacceptable & will impact egg consumption.
- Some will still buy cheapest egg if both Cage & FC are available.
- Step-up to Barn still too high.

- Light Egg Buyers accept $4.50. However $5.50 becomes unacceptable.
- More likely to step up if people are told what the difference means.

Source: Qzone – “Feedback on Housing Hens”
The survey participants were shown the diagrams below and asked:

“Taking account of your family budget and your views about the way hens are housed....Which is the best price/housing option for you?

- **Cage**
  - Continuous food & water
  - Perches, nestboxes, scratching areas
  - Consistent quality egg
  - Lowest cost egg
  - At least 500cm² area per hen
  - Average price per dozen $3.28

- **Organic**
  - Same method as Free Range but farmed on organic pasture and fed organic food
  - Average price per dozen $9.76
barn

- Continuous food & water
- Perches, nestboxes, scratching areas
- Consistent quality egg
- Lowest cost egg
  - At least 1400 cm² area per hen
  - Average price per dozen $5.98

free range

- Continuous food & water
- Perches, nestboxes, scratching areas
- Consistent quality egg
- Lowest cost egg
  - At least 1000 cm² area per hen, plus outside space
  - Average price per dozen $6.81

furnished colony

- Continuous food & water
- Perches, nestboxes, scratching areas
- Consistent quality egg
- Lowest cost egg
  - At least 750 cm² area per hen. Greater than 30% more space than cage
  - Average price per dozen ?
Enriched Colony attracts a third of respondents, the highest percentage of any system.