



Inquiry into whether New Zealand can afford to be free range

Recommendation

The report of the Primary Production Committee makes the following recommendations to the Government

- That the Government progressively amend the Animal Welfare Act 1999 to promote higher minimum standards of animal welfare for intensively farmed animals, such as chickens and pigs, and to provide legal definitions, as defined by the National Animal Welfare Advisory Committee, of how each farming system can meet these standards.
- That the Government review current animal welfare codes and compliance programmes in the light of the long-term goal of higher minimum standards.
- That the Government encourage pig farmers to progressively move towards free farming methods as quickly as possible, but with allowances for farrowing crates to assist with birthing.
- That the Government encourage poultry and egg farmers to adopt barn or free range farming techniques for their chickens, and to reduce the number of birds per square metre in colony cages.
- That the Government support an advertising campaign to better educate consumers and producers on the farming techniques for popular consumer products, such as pork, eggs, and chickens.

Introduction

The purpose of this report is to summarise our consideration of the question of whether New Zealand can afford to be free range.

The current situation

According to the Ministry for Primary Industries, poultry generated an estimated \$214 million in gross revenue last year. New Zealand currently has around 140 egg farms, with the majority of eggs being produced by battery cage farms (83 per cent), with the rest being farmed in barns (3 per cent) or by free-range methods (14 per cent).

The Ministry also estimates that pigs generated an estimated \$187 million of revenue last year. There are approximately 151 registered pig farms with an estimated 340,000 pigs. A number of different pig farming methods are used including sow stalls and farrowing crates.

Submitters

We heard submissions from three organisations, each with particular knowledge or expertise regarding whether New Zealand can afford to be free range.

Ministry for Primary Industries

The Deputy Director General of the Ministry of Primary Industries spoke to the ministry's submission. The submission includes discussion of what is meant by the terms "free range" and "animal welfare", a comparison of different systems for farming layer hens and pigs, information about animal welfare legislation in New Zealand and the new codes of welfare for layer hens and pigs, and discussion of economic considerations and other issues.

We heard that "free range" does not have a legal definition. The term is generally understood to mean that animals are free to range or roam, and that animals usually have access to the outdoors. The ministry noted that when the term is used for marketing purposes, it could refer to a farming system that most people would not consider to be free-range, for example where a large number of birds have access to a small outdoor dirt area.

We heard that there are four main systems used with layer hens. Battery cages house four to five birds in a raised cage, and allow good control of factors affecting the health of birds and the quality of eggs, such as hygiene and nutrition, but severely restrict most normal behaviours. Colony cages house anywhere from 20 to 90 birds, and include areas or furnishing designed to allow a range of normal behaviours. Barn farming can house from a few hundred to several thousand birds in single large area that includes separate nest boxes and perches, and may allow birds access to an outside or separate covered area.

Pigs can be confined at three stages of the production process. Pregnant sows are generally separated from other animals, often in small sow stalls, or sow crates. When they are ready to give birth, they are transferred to farrowing stalls, which keep the sow from lying on the piglets while still allowing the piglets access to the sow. Young pigs are often kept in barns while being prepared for market.

The National Animal Welfare Advisory Committee has developed new codes of welfare for layer hens and for pigs. In developing the new code for layer hens, NAWAC compared the animal welfare levels (taking behavioural needs into account) for battery cages, colony cages, barns, and barns with access to outside areas ("free range"). They found that battery cages did not meet the minimum requirements, but that the other three systems were broadly similar. As a result, battery cages are being phased out over 10 years starting from 2012. The new code for pigs bans sow stalls from 2016, and restricts the use to farrowing crates to four weeks.

Egg Producers Federation

A representative of the Egg Producers Federation of New Zealand told us that New Zealand's chicken industry was without the avian diseases that affect most other countries. The vast majority of chicken farms are found to meet the standards set by the independent NAWAC committee, and are subject to regular inspections by Ministry for Primary Industry Animal Welfare Inspectors to ensure they are being upheld.

The Federation set out the increased costs involved with free range farming as opposed to caged. A mandatory move to free range farming would involve much higher costs to farmers, which would then be passed on to consumers. It noted that currently 83 percent of New Zealand egg sales are for caged eggs; and while there is a gradual move to free-range it is very slow. Free range as a percentage of the market has grown at just 1 percent per year cumulatively over the last 10 years.

SAFE (Save Animals from Exploitation)

The Executive Director of SAFE told us that his organisation is not necessarily in favour of free-range farming systems (SAFE's submission states that it has a vegetarian/vegan ethic), but sees them as preferable to the alternatives. They would be happy to see less chicken, eggs, and pork being produced and consumed over all. We were told that while broiler (meat) chicken farming in New Zealand could technically be considered as a barn or free-range system, it was innately cruel due to the birds having been selectively bred for fast growth.

We heard that colony cages did not necessarily provide any more space per bird on average than battery cages, and that this was an example of how the new minimum standards could still allow for cruel conditions. We also heard that retailer decisions on which brands to stock were as important as consumer choices in promoting ethically-produced food.

Conclusions

In considering this inquiry we have attempted to strike a balance between ensuring farming of chickens and pigs in New Zealand remains a viable business, while ensuring our reputation as a high quality food producing nation is reinforced by the best possible animal welfare standards.

In addressing the question of whether New Zealand can afford to be free range, we acknowledge a point made by the ministry that, for example, a well-run colony cage system with large, well-appointed cages could provide a higher level of animal welfare than a technically free-range system where the farmer and employees are not attentive to the needs of the animals. We note that stockmanship is a significant contributor to animal welfare regardless of the farming system used. We consider the question should be recast as whether New Zealand can afford to require minimum levels of animal welfare that are comparable to a well-run free-range system.

We do not consider that it will be affordable to reach that level quickly, or in a single step, but raising the minimum acceptable levels of animal welfare should be a long-term goal that informs current policy.

We recommend that the Government progressively amend the Animal Welfare Act to promote higher minimum standards of animal welfare for intensively farmed animals, such as chickens and pigs.

We endorse the recently-commenced phasing-out of battery cages, as they are inherently inhumane, and the planned phasing out of sow crates, but are concerned about the long-term suitability of replacement systems. To this end, we recommend that the Government encourage pig farmers to move to free farming methods, but with allowances for farrowing crates to assist with birthing

We recommend that the Government review current animal welfare codes and compliance programmes in the light of the long-term goal of higher minimum standards. We recommend that the Government encourage pig farmers to progressively move towards free farming methods as quickly as possible, but with allowances for farrowing crates to assist with birthing.

We recommend that the Government encourage poultry and egg farmers to adopt barn or free range farming techniques for their chickens, and to reduce the number of birds per square metre in colony cages.

We note the disconnect between public opinion concerning the acceptability of intensive farming methods and consumer purchasing behaviour. Through an advertising campaign we hope to reduce the disparity between opinion and purchasing behaviour.

We recommend that the Government investigate introducing a robust system for communicating to consumers the production methods for various foodstuffs.

Some of us consider that the education system should only be directed at consumers.

Appendix

Committee procedure

The committee met on 16 and 17 July 2013 to consider the inquiry. The committee received and heard three submissions. Evidence was heard from the Ministry for Primary Industries, the Egg Producers Federation, and SAFE (Save Animals from Exploitation).

Committee members

Alexi Carlier (Chairperson)
Daisy Cadigan
Amber Coates-Reid
Yanni Cowie
Michelle Huang
Stella Ivory
Jake Lamkum
Emily McCarthy
Julia Musgrave
Madeleine Nash
Jaleighquar Rahiri
Sara Sterne