

Increased awareness of the systemic cruelty inflicted upon hens and their chicks in the egg industry has brought these farming practices to the forefront of global animal advocacy, resulting in **significant progress** being made for chickens in other countries. The time for action in Australia is **well overdue**.

**Voiceless Briefing**

Unscrambled: The hidden truth of hen welfare in the Australian egg industry





The Australian egg industry is responsible for the welfare of over 25 million hens, supplying over 434 million dozen eggs every year. Voiceless believes that the widespread abuse within the cage egg industry can no longer be permitted, and calls for an immediate end to the use of battery cages in Australia.

This industry is divided across three primary production systems – battery cages, barn-laid and free range – with serious welfare concerns across all egg production. This separation in farming systems has made eggs one of the more confusing and debated animal products on the market.

Importantly, there is a sizeable gap between consumer understanding and the actual animal welfare standards of these production systems, with hen welfare suffering as a result.

Despite growing interest in cage-free egg production, the Australian egg industry is still highly supportive of the use of cages.

Arguments about ‘consumer choice’ are being used to stifle legitimate concerns about the ethics of battery cage use, despite the fact that Australia is lagging well behind international standards on this issue.

Battery cages have already been banned in a significant number of global markets due to the severe welfare issues inherent in their use, including Canada, New Zealand, Switzerland and Austria. In Australia, the ACT is the only jurisdiction to have completely prohibited the use of battery cages.

## Caged cruelty

Arguably factory farming at its worst, the battery cage production system permanently confines hens in small cages within a shed for their entire lives.

Each hen usually has between 4 – 7 cage mates and can be allocated space no greater than that of an A4 sized piece of paper.

Despite having complex social and behavioural needs, caged hens have minimal space for movement and can barely stretch their wings. They are given no nests in which to lay their eggs and no litter for scratching, pecking or dust bathing.

This lack of space prevents them from performing their full range of behaviour and can lead to severe physical and mental stress.

Forced to stand on wire flooring, hens often suffer chronic pain from foot lesions and serious bone and muscle weakness. The wire cage flooring can result in a hen's feet becoming sore, cracked and deformed, and in some cases, her nails twisting around the wire mesh flooring to restrict her movements even further or trapping her to the floor.

The lack of space, and subsequent extreme inactivity, can result in hens developing disuse osteoporosis, leading to chronic pain from bone fractures. This is a systemic problem across the cage egg industry, with a 2004 study estimating that 80-89% of commercial egg-laying hens suffer from osteoporosis.

There are approximately 11-12 million hens confined in battery cage systems across Australia.

For a detailed review of the welfare issues in egg production and Voiceless's recommendations, download *Unscrambled: The hidden truth of hen welfare in the Australian egg industry* from [voiceless.org.au/resources](http://voiceless.org.au/resources).



# Impact of egg production on a hen

All egg production in Australia involves negative welfare impacts for an egg-laying hen. These are what Voiceless refers to as 'inherent cruelties': husbandry practices or behaviours which are an intrinsic part of the egg production process across all production systems – cage, barn-laid and free range.

## EARLY SLAUGHTER

Hens have a natural life expectancy of up to 12 years, however, hens used in the egg industry are typically slaughtered at around 72 weeks of age.

## SELECTIVE BREEDING

Australian layer hens have been genetically selected to maximise egg production, which has also resulted in higher instances of tumour growth, prolapses and can weaken immune systems.

## OSTEOPOROSIS

Extreme inactivity can result in hens developing 'disuse osteoporosis', leading to chronic pain from bone fractures. The muscles and bones essentially waste away due to atrophy, with the hen's skeletal system becoming weak. High egg production also has a major impact on a hen's bone strength and contributes to layer hens suffering from a higher frequency of osteoporosis and bone fractures. This can be due to the unnaturally high number of eggs produced in a hen's lifetime and the amount of calcium required to produce so many egg shells.

## DAY-OLD CHICK SLAUGHTER

Male chicks are considered 'unsuitable' for production purposes, so they are slaughtered shortly after hatching. The method of slaughter is either gassing or grinding up the chicks alive (maceration).

## DEBEAKING

Debeaking most commonly involves the amputation or searing off of the upper and lower beak through the application of an electrically heated blade or infrared beam. Debeaking can cause acute and chronic pain, particularly in older birds, due to tissue damage and nerve injury. Unlike human nails, a hen's beak has extensive nerve supply, including nociceptors, which would detect any pain.

## FORCED MOULTING

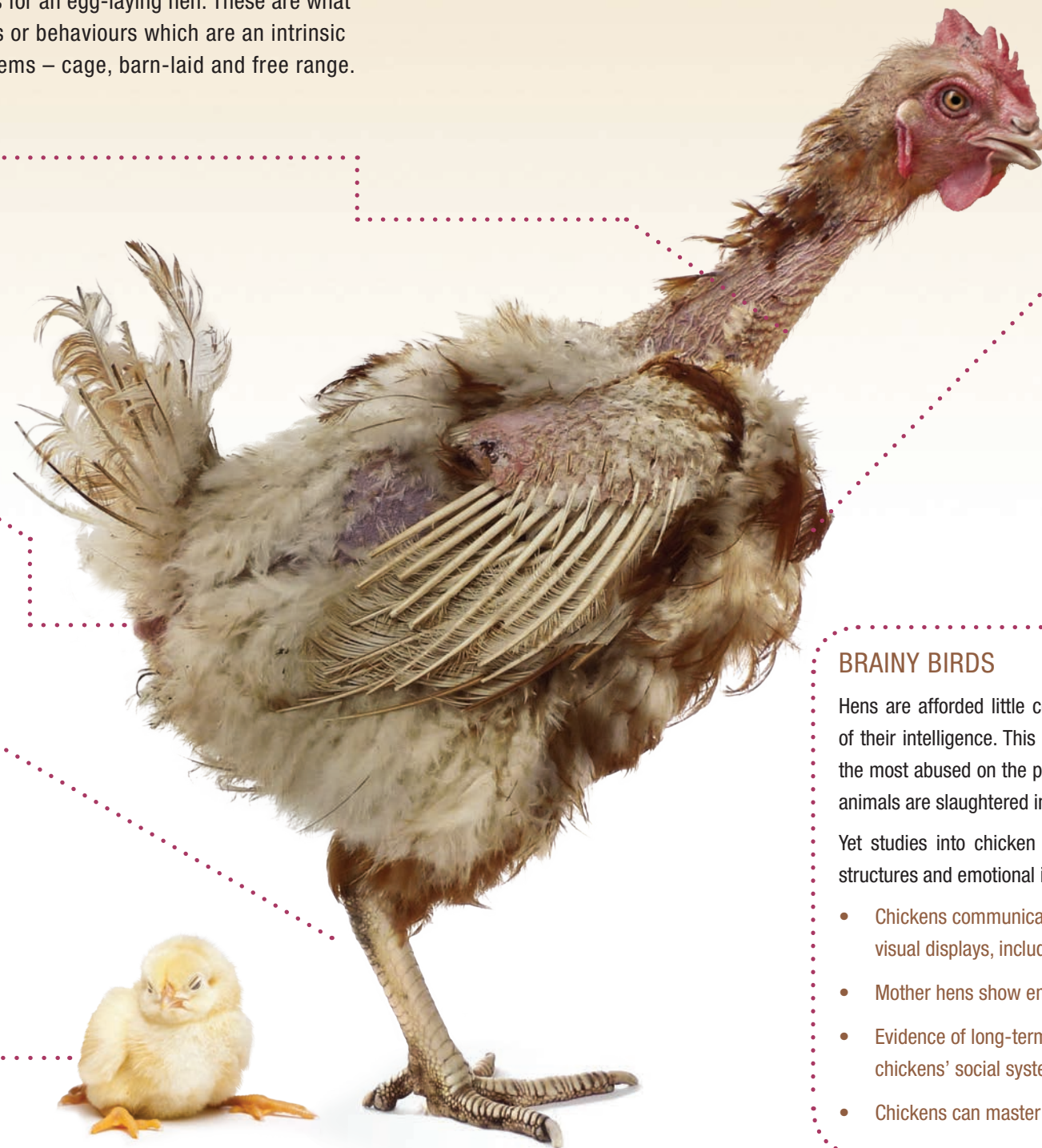
Forced moulting is a controversial practice where egg producers can remove all food and water from an entire flock to induce moulting. Forced moulting is used when the flock's egg production rate begins its natural decline, in an attempt to kick-start high production again.

## BRAINY BIRDS

Hens are afforded little consideration in terms of their sentience and acknowledgement of their intelligence. This lack of regard translates to chickens as a species being one of the most abused on the planet through the egg and chicken meat industries, where these animals are slaughtered in their billions every year.

Yet studies into chicken behaviour have discovered their use of complex skills, social structures and emotional intelligence. Research has shown:

- Chickens communicate by using over 24 different types of vocalisations as well as visual displays, including specific signals which assists recognition of individuals.
- Mother hens show emotional responses such as empathy.
- Evidence of long-term memory, eavesdropping and recognising hierarchy in chickens' social system.
- Chickens can master complex skills including numeracy, geometry and spatial ability.







For the first time in 15 years, the *Model Code of Practice for Poultry* is under review. While significant, Voiceless has **serious concerns** that this opportunity for change will instead be used as a means to permanently lock in the continued use of cages in Australia.

## Other production systems

### ENRICHED CAGES

Enriched cages (also known as furnished or colony cages) are bigger than battery cages, with in-built features such as perches and nesting areas. These cages, however, are still extremely confining with a hen's natural behaviour severely restricted.

Currently, enriched cages are not commonly used in Australia, however, this could possibly be industry's system of choice in the event of a ban on battery cages in Australia.

### BARN-LAID

Hens in barn systems are not caged but are housed in either a single or multi-tiered shed. Hens are able to roam within a shed and have access to nest boxes, but they do not have access to an outdoor range.

Barn systems confine hens indoors for the entirety of their lives, often in crowded and cramped sheds with as many as 12 birds per square metre.

### FREE RANGE

Free range, put simply, means hens who have access to the outdoors. In practice, however, this term has a very broad application and can translate to significantly different forms of farming.

In 2016, draft national standards for free range allowed for producers to keep hens in high flock sizes with high outdoor stocking densities of up to 10,000 birds per hectare.

Further, in the new standards, producers are only required to give hens access to the open range, meaning that hens from these systems may never *actually* go outside.

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## Pressure for change

Despite Australia's slow progress, there are emerging opportunities and trends towards significant advancements in animal welfare in the egg industry.

For instance, for the first time in 15 years, the *Model Code of Practice for Poultry* is under review. While significant, Voiceless has serious concerns that this opportunity for change will instead be used as a means to permanently lock in the continued use of cages in Australia.

Therefore, to address the serious welfare issues within the Australian egg industry, a multi-tiered approach is required. This approach must address the suffering of the millions of hens who are currently living within Australia's egg production industry, but also prepare for future generations of hens and their offspring.

To address the immediate suffering of hens and their chicks, industry and government must start working towards a ban on standard industry mutilation practices such as debeaking and the maceration of male chicks.

For the advancement of the protection of chickens, however, it is the role of business and consumers to lead the call for meaningful change.

### BUSINESSES CAN:

- Remove cage eggs from supply chains and influence suppliers to follow suit. This is already underway in Australia with McDonald's, Subway and Hungry Jack's having announced such policies.
- Develop progressive animal welfare policies that reflect core principles for the ethical treatment of animals.
- Consider using egg-free alternatives and egg replacers for products.

### CONSUMERS CAN:

- Go egg-free and support the wide variety of products that do not contain egg products.
- Make informed choices when it comes to purchasing decisions.
- If eggs are purchased, consider using consumer information tools such as phone apps and websites to find out about the farming practices used by egg brands and labels, or accreditation schemes.
- Ask food manufacturers to use egg alternatives, and local businesses to commit to using cage free eggs.





**The Hon Michael Kirby** AC CMG  
Former Justice of the High Court  
of Australia  
Voiceless Patron

## Join the movement for change

Voiceless is an independent, non-profit think tank working to stop animal cruelty in Australia caused by factory farming. Founded by father and daughter team, Brian and Ondine Sherman, we are supported by a community of respected minds who are speaking up for animal protection.

Please add your voice and help us create a world in which animals are treated with respect and compassion.



**Dr Jane Goodall** DBE  
Conservationist  
Voiceless Patron

### INDIVIDUALS CAN:

- Make compassionate choices
- Start a conversation
- Contact your MP
- Donate to Voiceless

### BUSINESSES CAN:

- Source ethical, cruelty-free products
- Lead your industry
- Educate your market
- Sponsor Voiceless

### LAWYERS CAN:

- Grow your knowledge of animal law
- Advocate for legislative reforms
- Take on animal law matters
- Provide pro bono advice

### GOVERNMENTS CAN:

- Be informed
- Listen to community concerns
- Support industry progress
- End legalised cruelty



**Professor Charlie Teo** AM  
Neurosurgeon  
Voiceless Patron

voiceless   
the animal protection institute

2 Paddington Street,  
Paddington NSW 2021  
Phone **02 9357 0723**  
[info@voiceless.org.au](mailto:info@voiceless.org.au)  
[www.voiceless.org.au](http://www.voiceless.org.au)



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