

Egg fight breaks out over California chicken welfare law requiring bigger digs for hens

By TRACIE CONE | Associated Press | Jun 19, 09 3:32 PM CDT in US

By one of the biggest margins in California's rich initiative history, voters decreed last year that egg-laying hens must be able to stretch their wings without touching another bird or a cage wall.

But the details of the new animal welfare law are bedeviling egg farmers. Some are even rumored to be breeding hens with shorter wings, a tactic producers deny with a laugh.

And a newly introduced bill in Sacramento would require competing farmers in other states to adopt California's standards if they want to sell eggs in the Golden State.

California's egg producers say they don't know how to comply with the vague language of the Prevention of Farm Animal Cruelty Act, short of allowing hens to range free.

"We aren't about to invest millions without black and white standards that talk about stocking densities, height and width," Modesto egg producer Jill Benson said.

Benson operates three barns, each the size of a football field, that house 500,000 hens in wire cages.

Industrywide, chickens are now provided an average space the size of an 8-by-11 sheet of paper.

The new regulations approved in November don't take effect until 2015, but the egg fight has already come to roost in the state Capitol, where lawmakers are being lobbied by producers to clarify the requirements and address the added cost to meet them.

"You still have an industry in denial," state Sen. Dean Florez, chairman of the Food and Agriculture Committee, told The Associated Press after a hearing this week.

Though last year's ballot measure didn't specifically call for cage-free hen houses, the Humane Society of the United States admittedly sponsored and wrote it so no currently available cage systems could meet the requirements.

"Cage-free was what we were talking about," said Jennifer Fearing, who guided the Proposition 2 campaign for the organization.

In a 63.5 percent landslide last November, eight million voters decided the state's 19.4 million confined, egg-laying hens must have room to stand up, turn around and extend their wings.

California egg ranchers contend the requirements will add a penny to the cost of every egg and could put them out of business as they try to compete with operations in other states that don't face the same rules.

California ranchers are seeking ways to keep their hens in cages and still comply with the law. They say caging systems make it easier and more cost effective to feed hens, keep them clean and collect their eggs.

"The question is how much space" chickens must have, Debbie Murdock, executive director of the United Egg Producers, said on the group's Web site.

The recently introduced bill in Sacramento would require out-of-state producers who supply more than half of the 10 billion eggs consumed by Californians each year to treat their laying hens as well as Golden State producers.

California's \$300 million egg industry, the fifth largest in the nation, warned in ballot arguments that passage of Proposition 2 would require hens to live outdoors.

The Humane Society countered the industry should have little trouble adapting since it already has its own guidelines for farmers who choose to raise hens cage-free. The guidelines call for perches, scratching areas and nests for chickens living in flocks.

"Now that Prop 2 is law, the egg industry is trying to punch a hole in it, undo the will of the voters," Humane Society CEO Wayne Pacelle wrote in a statement to the AP.

Meanwhile, restaurant chains such as Burger King and Wendy's have started using more cage-free eggs at the urging of the society.

Society officials say cage-free hens could position California farmers to dominate the fast-growing specialty egg market, which accounts for about 5 percent of nationwide sales.

"California egg producers will never win the race to the cheapest egg, because Iowans live closer to the grain," Fearing said. "But they can win the race to the most highly valued egg."