

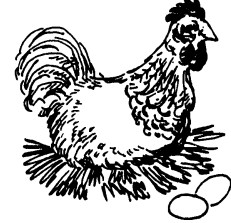


*The University of Georgia*

**Cooperative Extension Service**

*College of Agricultural and Environmental Sciences / Athens, Georgia 30602-4356*

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## **COMMERCIAL EGG TIP . . .**

### **ADDRESSING THE CAGE SYSTEM**

The commercial egg industry in the U.S. over the past 50 years has evolved from small backyard flocks that supplied eggs to the home and maybe a few neighbors to thousands of birds in commercial farms that supply eggs to commercial retailers. These changes have occurred with the changing needs of society as diminished numbers of people have remained on farms. Today the cage system is considered the most economical way in which the farmer can meet the demands of the market while maintaining the health and welfare of the birds. Approximately 98% of commercial egg production in the U.S. is from caged layers and although the trend in some European countries has been to move away from the cage system, the use of cage systems is on the rise in developing countries.

While surveys have shown that consumers are confident that producers make appropriate decisions regarding the welfare of their birds, there is a growing part of society that believe that the cage system is inhumane and as such it's use should be discontinued. As recently as June 2007, one of the country's largest egg producers had to defend itself against animal cruelty charges in court. Even though the company was found not guilty on all the counts, this incident is a stark reminder for all of us involved in commercial egg production and other animal rearing industries that the eyes and ears of the public are on us.

In its response to questions regarding the welfare of hens reared in cages, the United Egg Producers developed guidelines for the egg industry as early as in the 1980's. New guidelines were developed from recommendations by a scientific advisory committee commissioned by the UEP in 1999. The guidelines addressed matters that are relevant to the well-being of laying hens and included recommendations for housing and cage space allowance, beak trimming, molting, and transportation and handling. When the guidelines were originally published in October 2000, they were presented to the industry as a voluntary program that producers could accept and implement in their facilities; however, this has since changed and is now a committed "United Egg Producers" program. In addition to this a producer will also have to meet additional UEP requirements in order

### **PUTTING KNOWLEDGE TO WORK**

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to be recognized as UEP Certified. One such requirement is that the company be audited on an annual basis by an independent auditor who is designated and approved by the UEP. This is done in order to ensure that the producers are complying with the Animal Husbandry Guidelines. Eggs produced by UEP certified companies can be identified in the marketplace by the “United Egg Producers Certified” logo which is displayed on the egg packaging.

It is in the interest of all egg producers to become more vigilant in efforts to maintain optimal welfare in their flocks. This can be accomplished by following the guidelines put in place by the UEP. As consumers become more aware of organizations such as the UEP who are implementing practices to improve animal welfare, a product carrying the UEP logo will be in an advantageous position when compared to a product without it. The egg industry has come a long way and maintaining consumer confidence is of utmost importance to ensure its continuation. Research continues to develop new ways to improve the welfare of laying hens, especially in cage systems and the guidelines put in place by the UEP are subject to change as new scientific information becomes available.

**Reference:** United Egg Producers animal husbandry guidelines for U.S. egg laying flocks (2006 Edition).



Claudia Dunkley  
Extension Poultry Scientist

Extension County Coordinator/Agent

**\*\*Consult with your poultry company representative before making management changes.\*\***

“Your local County Extension Agent is a source of more information on this subject”