



GCAW POSITION ON COMBINATION SYSTEMS FOR LAYING HENS

BACKGROUND

Combination systems for laying hens, also known as combi-cages, convertible housing systems or 'lock-back' cages, are a type of production system for laying hens that can be operated as either a cage or cage-free system. They are similar in appearance to multi-tier aviary systems but have flaps or doors which can be closed to confine the hens within the tiers, temporarily or permanently. When operated with the doors in the closed position, these systems have the same negative impacts on laying hen welfare as caged production systems.

Unlike multi-tier aviary systems, combination systems typically have partitions within the tiers and an absence of ramps between tiers, which restricts the movement of the hens within the system, even when operated with the doors open. The main impact on welfare, whether operated as a cage or cage-free system, is a restriction of the behavioural freedom of the birds.

Combination systems are a relatively new development in the industry and, as such, it is not clear how they are addressed by legislation. It is currently difficult for food companies to monitor and avoid the use of combination systems within their cage-free egg supply chains.

There is limited information available on the prevalence of combination systems, but they are present in Italy, Spain and the US, in addition to other countries. However, in the UK, the British Egg Industry Council¹ has prohibited the use of combination systems within its industry standard for barn eggs.

GCAW POSITION

The following statement is based on the wording published on the GCAW website in May 2020, along with reporting on Members' progress towards their cage-free egg commitments:

Combination systems for laying hens, also known as combi-cages, convertible housing systems or 'lock-back' cages, are not regarded as truly 'cage-free', as such systems combine aspects of conventional cages and multi-tiered aviaries. In a 'doors closed' position, hens are confined to cages and the system reverts to being a cage system. GCAW does not consider the use of combination systems as compatible with corporate cage-free egg commitments.

¹ The British Egg Industry Council (BEIC) is an inter-professional organisation of 11 trade associations representing more the egg industry in the UK and operates the Lion Code assurance scheme, which covers 90% of UK egg production.

GCAW ACTION

The GCAW Laying Hen Welfare Working Group will engage with assurance schemes and other stakeholders to explore opportunities for enabling traceability and management of combination systems in supply chains. GCAW will conduct a survey of egg producers in key sourcing regions to better understand the prevalence of combination systems and thereby the scale of the issue.

GCAW MEMBER POSITIONS

The majority of GCAW Members have cage-free egg commitments and some of them also have an ambition to ensure combination systems are not used within their supply chains. Others are in discussion with suppliers on this issue, to better understand the current situation in their supply chains.

PROCESS TO REACH GCAW POSITION

GCAW went through the following steps to arrive at this position:

- Hosting an expert briefing from Compassion in World Farming, who presented current scientific knowledge on the topic;
- Discussion amongst members of the GCAW Laying Hen Welfare Working Group;
- Preparing a draft of this position statement to formalise GCAW's stance on this issue, building on the statement issued alongside Members' cage-free egg progress reporting in May 2020;
- Finalizing and publishing this position statement.

MONITORING PROGRESS

GCAW will publish updates on progress made against the GCAW Position on Combination Cages.