



THE MARYLAND HOUSE OF DELEGATES
ANNAPOLIS, MARYLAND 21401

February 19, 2024

To: The Honorable Marc A. Korman
Chair, Environment and Transportation Committee

From: Delegate Jen Terrasa
District 13, Howard County

Re: Sponsor Testimony in Support of HB 834 Agriculture - Confinement of Egg-Laying Hens in Commercial Egg Production - Prohibitions

Dear Chair Korman, Vice Chair Boyce, and Members of the Environment and Transportation Committee,

Thank you for the opportunity to present HB 834 which phases out the practice of confining egg-laying hens in inhumane battery cages, which are generally only a few feet across and barely a foot and a half tall, and house as many as 10 hens. HB 834 is a reintroduction of HB 357 from 2024 with modifications to address concerns raised last year about farm size and time needed to implement.

The Problem:

These cramped barren wire cages deprive hens of the basic ability to spread their wings or engage in natural behavior, causing psychological stress, self-pecking, and increased rates of osteoporosis. Hens are forced to eat, sleep, and defecate in the same space and are denied almost everything that is natural to her. The unsanitary conditions also increase salmonella risks, not just for hens but for consumers as well.

Currently, some companies charge an artificial premium for eggs that meet heightened welfare and food safety standards, creating a two-tiered system where higher-income citizens can afford safer products, while others may settle for potentially unsafe options.

The Solution:

HB 834 aims to transition Maryland's egg industry to cage-free housing systems by January 1, 2030, for farms with at least 5,000 egg-laying hens. These systems are permitted to be indoor or outdoor, where hens are free to roam, and provided with the opportunity to exhibit natural behaviors through scratch areas, perches, nest boxes, and dust bathing

areas. The bill excludes small farms with fewer than 5,000 hens, focusing on the largest egg manufacturers, who produce about 98.5% of Maryland's eggs. The United Egg Producers' cage-free standards would be implemented under the bill, ensuring a balance between humane treatment of hens and the continued operation of egg producers.

Industry Trends & Consumer Support:

The question is no longer if the industry is going cage-free, but how to create a smooth transition for farmers and consumers while ensuring better animal welfare and food safety. More than 200 of the country's largest food companies have committed to switching to a 100 percent cage-free egg supply. This includes Burger King, Unilever, General Mills, Aramark, and Costco, along with Maryland-based Sodexo and Marriott. This bill will keep Maryland farmers on track to meet that demand, while providing regulatory certainty and increasing access to safer eggs for Maryland families. Small and family farmers with flocks of under 5,000 birds would be exempt from the new requirement.

According to a recent survey conducted by Hart Research, a strong majority of Marylanders want the state legislature to pass cage-free legislation that would require all eggs produced and sold in Maryland be from cage-free facilities. Two-thirds of Maryland voters favor this legislation. Even after hearing opponents' claims, support for cage-free legislation remains unchanged amongst Maryland voters. Another survey (conducted by YouGov) found that when presented with a photo of how egg-laying hens are typically confined in conventional egg production, even more Maryland voters (83%) supported cage-free legislation.

The Price of Eggs:

Some critics argue that banning battery cages will dramatically increase the price of eggs. However, avian flu outbreaks have been the primary cause of recent price hikes across the country. While avian flu is often passed from wild birds to domesticated chickens, HB 834 does not mandate outdoor access for hens. Most commercial cage-free hens live their entire lives indoors, meaning they wouldn't interact with wild birds and thus would not catch avian flu from them.

Furthermore, the production cost differential between cage and cage-free housing systems is minimal, and once cage-free eggs become the standard, retail markup will decline, making eggs more affordable.

Conclusion:

HB834 is a critical step toward creating a more humane egg industry in Maryland. It will provide healthier conditions for hens and a safer, more affordable product for consumers. Maryland is ready to join the growing list of states and companies that are making cage-free the future of egg production.

I respectfully urge a favorable report.