



## Maryland Veterinary Medical Association (MDVMA)

Established in 1886, MDVMA is a volunteer, non-profit organization comprised primarily of licensed Maryland Veterinarians.

### **HB0834 - Agriculture - Confinement of Egg-Laying Hens in Commercial Egg Production - Prohibitions**

**Committee: Environment and Transportation**

**February 17, 2025**

#### **MDVMA Position: Information**

Animal welfare, conservation of resources and protection of the health of the public are the pillars of veterinary medicine. As the largest organization of veterinarians in Maryland, the Maryland Veterinary Medical Association wishes to make clear, there is no scientific body of evidence to suggest that cage-free eggs are more nutritious, safer, carry less foodborne pathogen risk, or are necessarily more humane.

Neither the Food and Drug Administration nor the USDA's Food Safety and Inspection Service have identified any increased risk of foodborne illness from caged eggs. What is likely most critical regarding bacterial contamination of shelled eggs is exactly where the egg is deposited. Salmonella and E. coli are omnipresent in environments that house laying hens and if the egg is deposited on an unclean floor or outdoor environment or on a soiled conveyor belt, bacterial contamination can result in significant risk factors to the consuming public. It is important to note that the conveyor belt is likely to be a component of both a modern caged system and a cage-free system. Additionally, when chickens lay eggs in predictable locations (like conveyor belts available in both caged and free-range systems), there is an opportunity to focus extensively on keeping this surface free of organic debris. The recovery rate of critical bacterial taxons from egg conveyor belts tends to be lower than from any other areas of the housing system (caged or free range).

Regardless of how a hen is housed, eggs and egg products are inspected by the USDA and FDA for safety and appropriate labeling. Additionally, the Egg Safety Final Rule applies to both caged and cage-free eggs to ensure adequate protection of the public from foodborne illness.

From a welfare perspective it is evident a hen housed outside of a cage has a more natural life. That does carry benefits to the individual welfare of that animal. This is the only meritorious reason for such mandates. Producers aren't caging these animals to be inherently cruel. Hens display behavioral characteristics that can, and many times do lead to welfare issues of their own including: cannibalism and other mutilation type behaviors and cages can prevent the manifestation of these undesirable behavioral characteristics. Additionally, parasites that infect birds are present in significantly higher numbers when birds are in contact with floors and dirt. Additionally, birds are significantly more likely to fall ill and die from these diseases when housed in more natural environments. When birds are unable to produce well in their environments it is not only a welfare issue to the bird but, also an inherent risk to the public who depend on adequate egg and meat production to maintain food supplies. Enriched caged environments, specifically prohibited by this proposal could present an opportunity to enhance the quality of life for the chicken while minimizing exposure to the aforementioned risk factors.

Finally, High Path Avian Influenza is a disease of significant risk to not only our poultry but our regional economy and global food security. Increased interface between production poultry and migratory birds and waterfowl increases the likelihood of these outbreaks which we have seen a resurgence of in recent years. It is true that screens can reduce predation of free range birds effectively, but, they are limited in their ability to prevent the transfer of highly virulent and pathogenic strains of airborne viral diseases.

The MDVMA wishes to highlight there are inherent advantages to both free range and caged production systems for the health of the bird and the public. The choice of which type of egg to purchase is, and should remain for Maryland consumers to decide. We believe it is critical to food security/public health that Maryland producers have the ability to produce eggs with flexible systems that reduce externalities posed by adverse disease or weather events when necessary while maintaining welfare of the individual chicken.

MARYLAND VETERINARY MEDICAL ASSOCIATION

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