

Animal Welfare Obligation or Opportunity - An Egg Producer's Perspective

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I have been in the egg business all of my working life and have experienced some of the best and some of the worst economic cycles in this sector. Despite this, I remain steadfastly committed to the business and enjoy each day never exactly knowing what will challenge me. I have only worked for one company my entire career, so my perspective is limited by my experience. This being said, the past few years as Chairperson of the UEP (United Egg Producers) Animal Welfare Producer Committee, I have had the opportunity to guide other industry leaders through some tough questions of refinement to the UEP Certified Program. I am pleased that the UEP Certified Program is recognized around the world as a proactive approach to practical animal welfare in a commercial production scenario. Our industry trade association leaders continue to tell us that we have set the standard in animal agriculture by being willing to take bold steps that other species are struggling with.

In the late 1990's the first discussions began to occur amongst industry leaders about how possibly to respond to the increasing pressure from animal rights activists. While the defensive actions such as increased penalties for illegal trespass of our farms were pursued, some had the vision about what would be acceptable in terms of new animal husbandry practices. Certainly, these thoughts were stimulated by the report from Europe of the emotion based directives that were banning caged egg production in the future. Science did not play a role in the decisions being made and it seemed that producers and marketers felt helpless lacking alternative proposals. Science as a foundation should be embraced in the fight against those that would like to see all animal agriculture abolished and society to become vegan.

US producers asked for a scientific panel to be formed to review the science and to make recommendations back to industry. This committee, chaired by Dr. Jeff Armstrong, convened with some of the best scientists. They were asked to review the literature, visit egg farms, talk with cage manufacturers, to consider all production systems but to focus on cages, and to make

recommendation for industry changes as well as research needs. They undertook this challenge with specific emphasis on the basic questions: *“Do conventional cages provide for humane care of egg laying hens?”* Cage space, beak trimming, molting & handling, transportation and slaughter were topics of great focus. They completed their review and reported to industry in September of 2000. The UEP Board endorsed the recommendations and formed a producer committee to work them into a program.

Over the next year, details evolved dealing with each recommendation. Cage configuration, space per bird, feeder and water space, air quality, lighting, biosecurity, beak trimming, molting, handling and transportation and backfilling were all massaged into a package. At this time, the guidelines were written for caged production only. Virtually all proposed guidelines were adopted in early 2002 however cage space was implemented with a several year phase in schedule so that supply would not be impacted so as to hamper the ability to supply our customers. Producers understood there would be cost increases with estimates varying widely. The faith of industry leaders allowed them to seize the opportunity to provide an alternative to regulatory obligation.

The program also needed to create a level playing field for all participants. If you wanted the benefits of the program, you would have to commit to 100% participation on all owned or controlled facilities. You would have to agree not to commingle production if you chose to purchase non certified production from non participants. Monthly compliance reports would be submitted and become a basis for third party auditing. Administrative costs would be paid by the voluntary participants and a mandatory support of public relations funding soon was endorsed.

The scientific committee felt that research was needed to determine if alternative molting methods could be successful. Feed withdrawal was the long standing practice for molting egg layers, but the public perception of feed removal would not allow this to continue. Research projects were funded and results showed producers it was possible to molt without feed removal. Some producers began to adapt to these methods and finally, beginning January 1, 2006, producers accepted that feed withdrawal molting would not be allowed any longer. Further research on feeder space and cage configuration is underway.

Auditing practices were devised and implemented in 2003. USDA and Validus are approved auditors allowing producers to designate their preference. The audits have changed over the years to conform to refinements to the program. Costs of audits are born by producers and failed audits result in re-audits within 30 days to maintain certification. Audit records are not kept by auditors to assure producers of confidentiality.

The extra costs of the program were a concern to producers. The opportunity was to seek remuneration from customers who would be able to offer to consumers a product produced by a program designed with science in mind. A trademarked logo was developed and producers were encouraged to put this onto packaging materials. FMI (Food Marketing Institute) and NCCR (National Council of Chain Restaurants) endorsed the program to its members. Consideration was given to separate quotations by Urner Barry. Egg trading began to differentiate between certified and non certified eggs. A public relations firm was hired and funded to create more awareness of the changes egg producers were making. Voluntary industry participation was surprisingly strong; far exceeding expectations. Around the world, other producer groups watched carefully as the program gained acceptance. The International Egg Commission fashioned its animal welfare program after the UEP program.

Today, over 85% of the layers in the industry are voluntary participants in the program. While it has been a challenge for the breaker sector of the industry to participate, recently this sector of the industry has begun to come on board. There is pressure from egg products customers for certified product that is driving the obligation to those that want to serve this part of the market.

The success of the program has not been without challenges. Various activist groups continue to mount campaigns challenging the program. Some have said, that if they can take down the best program the rest of the fight will be easy. Every challenge has been met and solved although more fights are expected. The talk about joining forces with other species groups to more effectively leverage resources is common. Public relations efforts attempt to direct education and messaging to target audiences. Consumer knowledge of the program is still somewhat limited, but when the industry is challenged by activists, it is the science based foundation that provides support. One tactic employed is to encourage customer conversion to eggs produced in non cage systems. The industry is close to having non cage system guidelines in place.

UEP supports customer choice and believes that members should be free to produce eggs in a variety of ways. The scientific committee strongly endorses cage production systems if managed according to the guidelines, while recognizing that other production systems need to have guidelines. In the end, consumers have the right to choose and pay for the product produced the way they want. Egg producers have the opportunity to seek a profit with any production system recognizing that with each production method they have an obligation to follow the established guidelines.

The UEP Certified Program has enjoyed great support and success. Voluntary participation of these science based guidelines has given the industry the opportunity to proactively promote husbandry practices that are truly different from prior practices. Egg production will never be the same.