

Fair trading Choice investigation

Buyers 'misled' on free-range eggs

Exclusive
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Consumer Affairs

Rolling hills. Dappled sunlight. Lush green pastures. Two chickens.

This is the picturesque environment egg producers like to paint for ethical consumers paying up to double the price for "free-range" eggs.

But the truth can be wildly different. Almost a third of free-range farms are cramming more than 20,000 hens into a hectare, while the best practice farms have only 1500 chickens in the same space.

The labelling of free-range eggs has become so nebulous, consumer group Choice is making its second-ever "super complaint" to the NSW Fair Trading Minister, calling for the government to standardise labelling.

Established in 2011, super complaints allow Choice to raise an issue that is significantly harming the interests of consumers in NSW. As part of its conditions, no brands can be identified.

Fair Trading will then research the issue, reporting on actions that may be taken to address it.

In its report to the Fair Trading Minister, Choice says consumers are being significantly misled by some egg producers, despite being charged a premium price.

The model code for the welfare of animals defines "free range" as 1500 birds a hectare. But 29 per cent of egg producers who declare their eggs are free range have about 20,000 chickens a hectare – more than 13 times the recommended number, the complaint says.

Choice policy adviser Angela McDougall said consumers were being "sold an idea" of what free range means.

"With the lack of standards and the wide variation in practices employed by supposedly free-range operations we think, in many

Slim pickings



On a free-range farm with a maximum of 1500 chickens a hectare, each animal gets 6.6m²

6.6m²

On a free-range farm with a maximum of 10,000 chickens a hectare, each animal gets 1m²



On a free-range farm with a maximum of 20,000 chickens a hectare, each animal gets 0.5m²

A chicken in a cage is typically allocated 0.055m²

Aaron Powell with chickens on the Oxhill Organics Farm in Wauchope.
Photo: Nigel McNeil

GRAPHIC: COLIN HAMILTON.

SOURCE: Domestic poultry CSIRO 2.4kg/towl.

cases, consumers are not getting what they paid for at this moment," Ms McDougall said.

Supermarket Coles is stocking 10,000 birds a hectare for their home brand free-range eggs, the report said.

Two free-range products by the same brand were found to charge \$1.25 per 100 grams, despite having 20,000 birds a hectare.

"They're making a killing out of these products.

"They are charging double for them and consumers have no way

of telling the good from the bad," Ms McDougall said.

The Australian Egg Corporation Limited – which was pushing for 20,000 chickens a hectare – said they supported Choice's call for regulation, but would prefer a national approach. "All our research had indicated that 20,000 would have been an appropriate range density. However, based on submissions made to the ACCC and its initial assessment, [we are] now reviewing the maximum density," spokesman Kai Ianssen said.

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Web Tablet

Video: Choice calls for investigation into free-range eggs.

Greens MP John Kaye – whose own bill on egg regulation was defeated in Parliament in August – said the free-range egg market was descending into a crisis.

"Genuine free-range farmers are

at risk of being run out of business and consumers who are prepared to pay more to avoid animal cruelty are being misled by low-cost low-welfare industrial producers.

Fourth generation dairy farmer Chris Eggert now labels his eggs "pasture ranged organic" to avoid being tarnished with the "free-range" brush, he said. "My chickens have heaps of room to move around in," Mr Eggert said. "I don't use the name free range on my eggs. I don't want my eggs associated with 20,000 birds per hectare."