

# THE YOLK'S ON US

## AUSSIE EGGS NOT ALL THEY'RE CRACKED UP TO BE

CLARISSA BYE

IF you think a bright yellow or orange egg yolk is a sign of a healthy well-cared-for chicken, think again.

Most eggs sold in Australia now have their yolks artificially brightened by manufactured additive food dyes placed into feed pellets.

The agricultural companies that sell colouring pig-

ments promote the additive as a means for farmers to "achieve the ideal colour outcome for egg yolks in chicken and duck eggs".

While Small Business Minister Kelly O'Dwyer will look to unscramble the labelling laws used to market eggs at a consumer affairs ministers meeting next month, the use of colour enhancers won't be up for discussion at the conference.

Choice consumer advocate Tom Goddard said the secretive use of additives, derived from agents such as capicum, marigold or paprika, and manufactured in China, was not regulated by Food Standards Australia because its rules did not extend to animal feed additives.

But he welcomed the crackdown on egg labelling laws, saying it had become a huge issue in the industry,

with at least 213 million eggs sold as "free range" last year that did not meet consumer expectations.

Small free-range egg farmer Philip Westwood said consumers could check to see whether their yolks had been "cosmetically coloured" — but only after they had purchased a carton.

"To fool their customers, most egg producers put manufactured colouring ad-

ditives in their chook food to maintain an illusion," he said.

"We refuse to adulterate the feed we give our hens. Some chefs believe the bright colour means they are free-range, but it's not the case. It often means hens are fed colour agents."

He said the hens on his farm produced a variety of yolk colours because they ate grass as part of

their outdoor life. He believes people allergic to capicum or paprika should know about their addition to chicken feed.

Australian Egg Corporation Limited spokesman Kai Ianssen confirmed the use of colourants in the form of carotenoids, or plant pigments, responsible for bright red, yellow and orange hues in Australian eggs.



### PLAYING CHICKEN

### WITH LABELLING LAWS

MEGAN DRAPALSKI

ORGANIC egg farmer Anne Eggert is so concerned about the mislabelling of eggs she does not call her free range chickens "free range".

Ms Eggert, who runs about 2000

chickens at Oxhill Organics in Wauchope, said the loose rules around labelling meant farmers could leave chickens on the same hectare of land for months.

"Free range can mean having a shed with 20,000 birds in it where they have access to the outdoors,

but there's nothing there so the birds don't want to go out," she said.

"There's a lot of terminology to wade through and there are all sorts of interpretations of free range."

The chickens at Oxhill are moved to a new paddock every two days and labelled pasture-raised.

Ms Eggert said farmers could include 4.9 per cent of non-organic

material in feed and still be certified organic — and added she did not believe a consistent bright yolk could be achieved without additives.

"Any certified organic egg should have good colour in the yolk, but they won't all have the same colour — it depends on a variety of factors including the age of the chicken and if we've had any rain," she said.

Australian Organic member Mulloon Creek Natural Farms' Toby Koenig said the feed given to his chickens was certified organic and contained marigold, a dark yellow flower which gave yolks colour.

But he said his eggs still had colour variation. So much so that in December he received complaints the yolks were too pale.

Organic egg farmer Ann Eggert with her sons Bill, 5, and Jimmy, 10, in Wauchope. Picture: Lindsay Moller