



Layer hen welfare: a challenging & complex issue

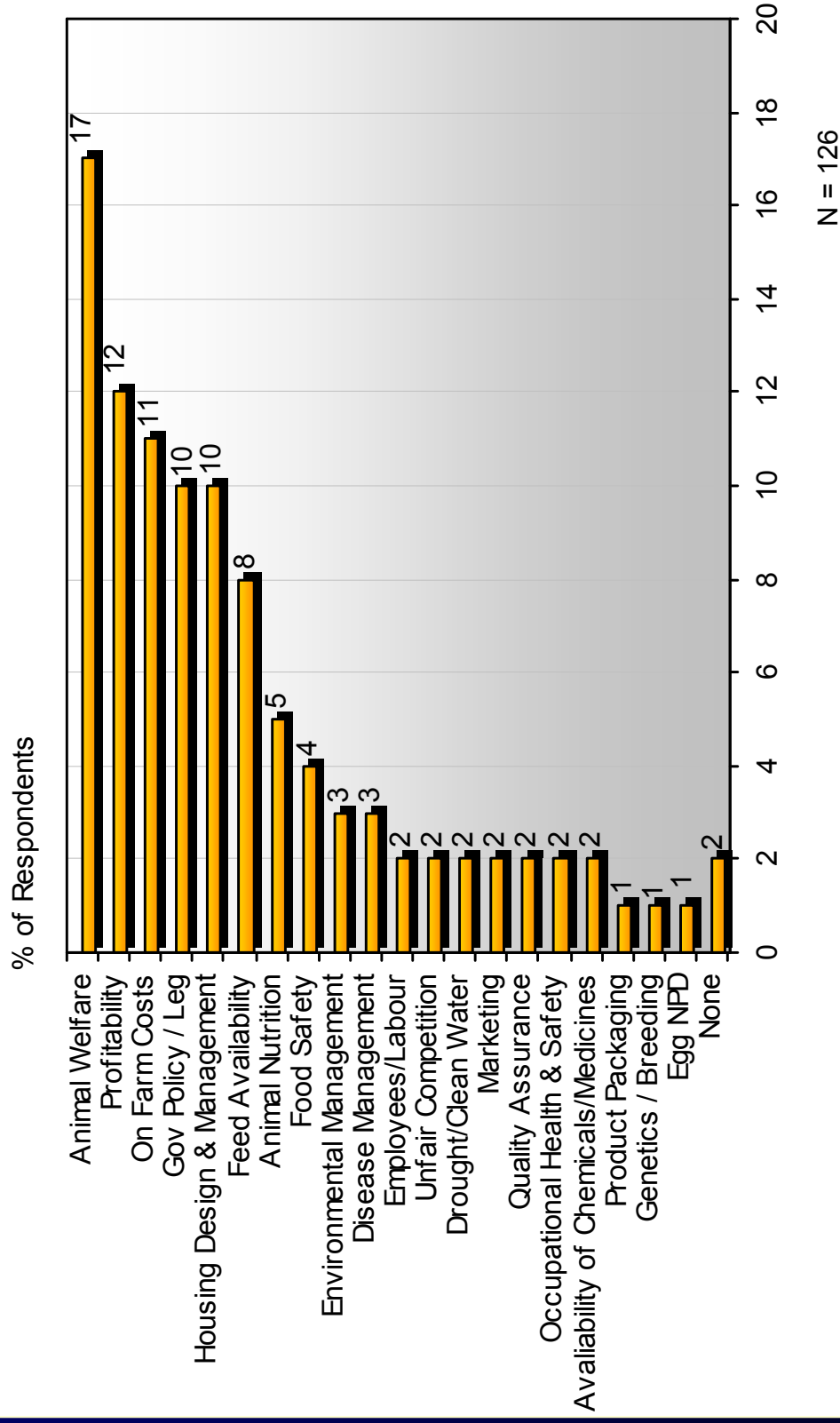


Dr David Witcombe

Program Manager – Research and Development

Australian Egg Corporation Limited

The Most Important On Farm Production Issue



Egg R&D Issues Study, December 2004

Why is hen welfare important?

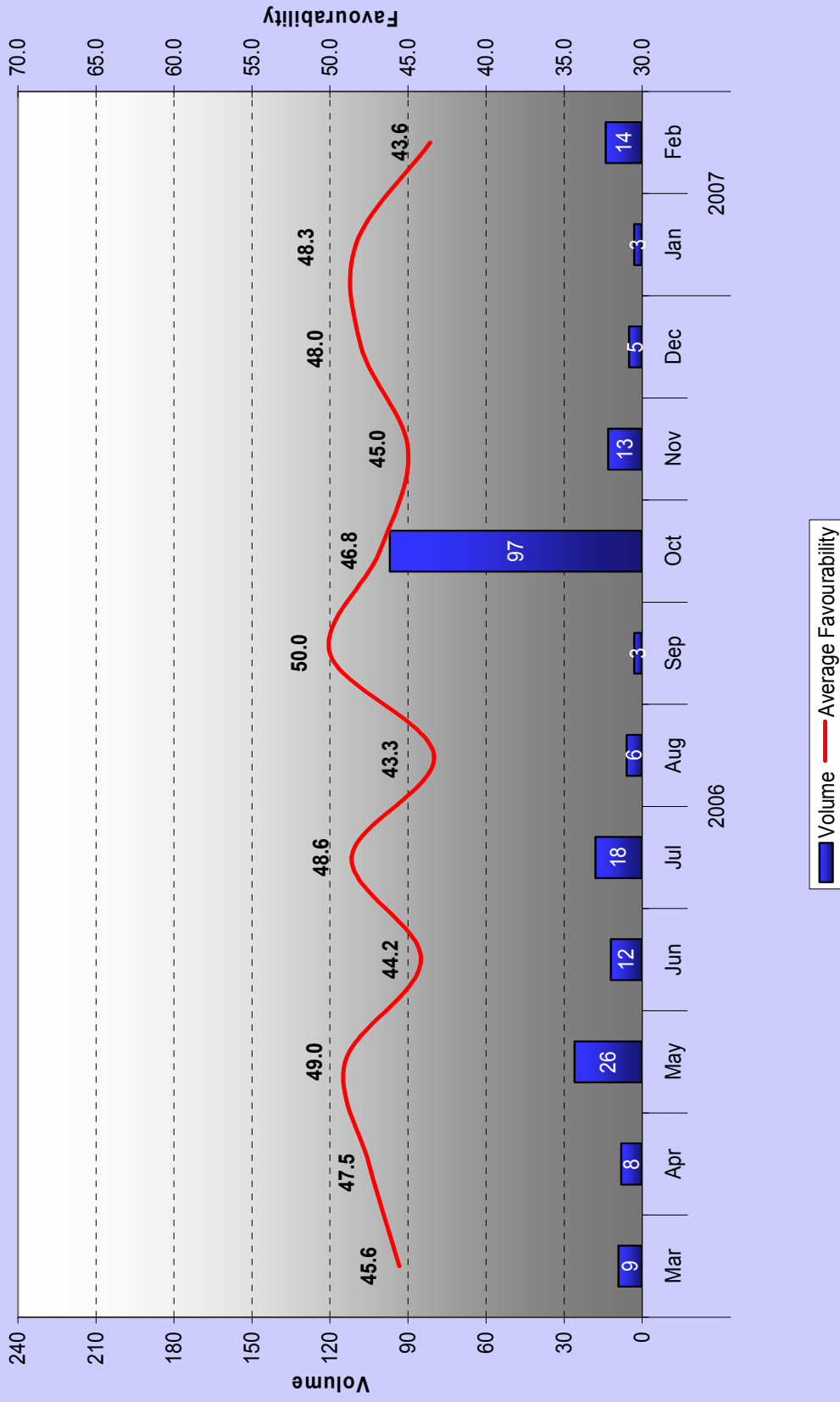
- Moral obligation
- Commercial interest
- Pressure for change
 - Government regulation – ARMCANZ, 2008 cage standards
 - Community attitudes
 - Animal protection groups



Welfare debate driven by animal protection groups

- RSPCA Australia
- Animals Australia
- Voiceless
- WSPA
- CIWF
- PETA
- Humane Society International
- Animal Liberation (autonomous state groups)
- The Greens

Animal Welfare Issues Media Trend Analysis



Shoppers to be told about the horrifying conditions in Australia's \$300 million battery hen industry

The real price of our cheap eggs

TIFFANY LAURIE
and ELOISE DORTCH

Hens' lives in A4-sized metal cage

Farm animals suffering

Rotten egg farm

The fox is in charge of the chickens

GRAEME MCEWEN

Welfare laws for farm animals are hamstringing by a conflict of interest.

As such confli- ctures
pales with the relevant
practice, however, the
not apply.

The act defines a "ma-
mal" to include "cattle,
pigs, poultry". This me-
example, that intensive

HOT TOPIC ► BATTERY HENS

Animal cruelty shame

Move to ban battery hens

COVER STORY

What now for battery hens?

Penned, like the hens



- “They spend their entire lives in a space three-quarters the size of an A4 sheet of paper...”
- “The cramped conditions make their bones so brittle they have trouble supporting their own weight.”
- “At one day old their beaks are often sliced off by a hot guillotine to stop them pecking each other to death.”
- “After a year in these nightmarish conditions...they are slaughtered for pet meat.”

The real price of our cheap eggs, West Australian, 03/10/2006

AAWS Community Attitudes Towards Animal Welfare

August 2006:

“The general public is easily emotionally engaged with the topic of animal welfare, however when challenged for factual information, responses are often **narrow or superficial**. Awareness and knowledge appears to stem largely from media reports (often sensationalist) on distressing stories of animal cruelty. Discussions also revealed a certain amount of **misinformation** in relation to issues, such as farming practices.”

What should dictate animal welfare policy?

- Good animal welfare policy should be based on good science
- Continued research to obtain objective assessment of the impact of management on flock welfare will provide outcomes that can be used to guide policy development based on factual rather than emotional evaluation

Key welfare issues for the egg industry

- “farmers do not keep birds happy and healthy”
- Husbandry practices
 - Beak trimming
 - Male culling
 - Moulting
 - Antibiotic use
- Cages & cage size – restriction of “normal” behaviour

Layer hen housing in the egg industry

- Cage
 - Hens are housed in cages within a shed
 - Cages accommodate between 4 – 20 birds
 - ~ 80% of production
- Barn
 - Hens are housed within a shed in which they are free to roam
 - ~5% of production
- Free range
 - Hens are housed in sheds & have access to an outdoor range during the day
 - ~15% of production

Layer hen housing in the egg industry

- Australia has a number of different production systems to satisfy consumer preferences
- No production system is perfect
- All systems have advantages & disadvantages in terms of welfare

Indicators of Welfare - Cage production

- Advantages
 - Better hygiene - lower risk of infectious disease & parasitism
 - Reduced aerial pollution
 - Better protection from the elements, predators & pests
 - Easier to catch & treat birds
 - Low incidence of bumble foot
 - Lower risk of feather pecking, cannibalism & smothering
 - Lower mortality



Indicators of welfare - Cage production

- Disadvantages
 - Restriction of behaviours
 - Wing flapping
 - Flying
 - Nesting
 - Perching
 - Dustbathing
 - Foraging
 - Reduced social interaction
 - Lower bone strength



Indicators of welfare - Barn production

- Advantages
 - Greater behavioural expression
 - Good protection from the elements
 - Increased social interaction
 - Better bone strength



Indicators of welfare - Barn production

- Disadvantages
 - Harder to catch & treat birds
 - Greater risk of collision damage
 - Increased risk of disease & parasitism
 - Increased incidence of bumble foot
 - Increased aerial pollution
 - Increased risk of feather pecking, cannibalism & smothering
 - Higher mortality



Indicators of welfare - Free range production

- Advantages
 - Greater behavioural expression
 - Increased social interaction
 - Better bone strength



Indicators of welfare - Free range production



- Disadvantages
 - Increased exposure to the elements, pests & predators
 - Harder to catch & treat birds
 - Greater risk of collision damage
 - Increased risk of disease & parasitism
 - Increased incidence of bumble foot
 - Increased aerial pollution
 - Increased risk of feather pecking, cannibalism & smothering
 - Higher mortality

Issues for welfare assessment of layers

- **Weighting**
 - Individual vs group welfare
 - Duration of condition
 - Magnitude
 - Comparison
- Welfare experts often have little objective basis on which to base their opinions
- Welfare assessment often underpinned by subjective evaluation

Relative importance of good health and manifestation of normal behavioural repertoire

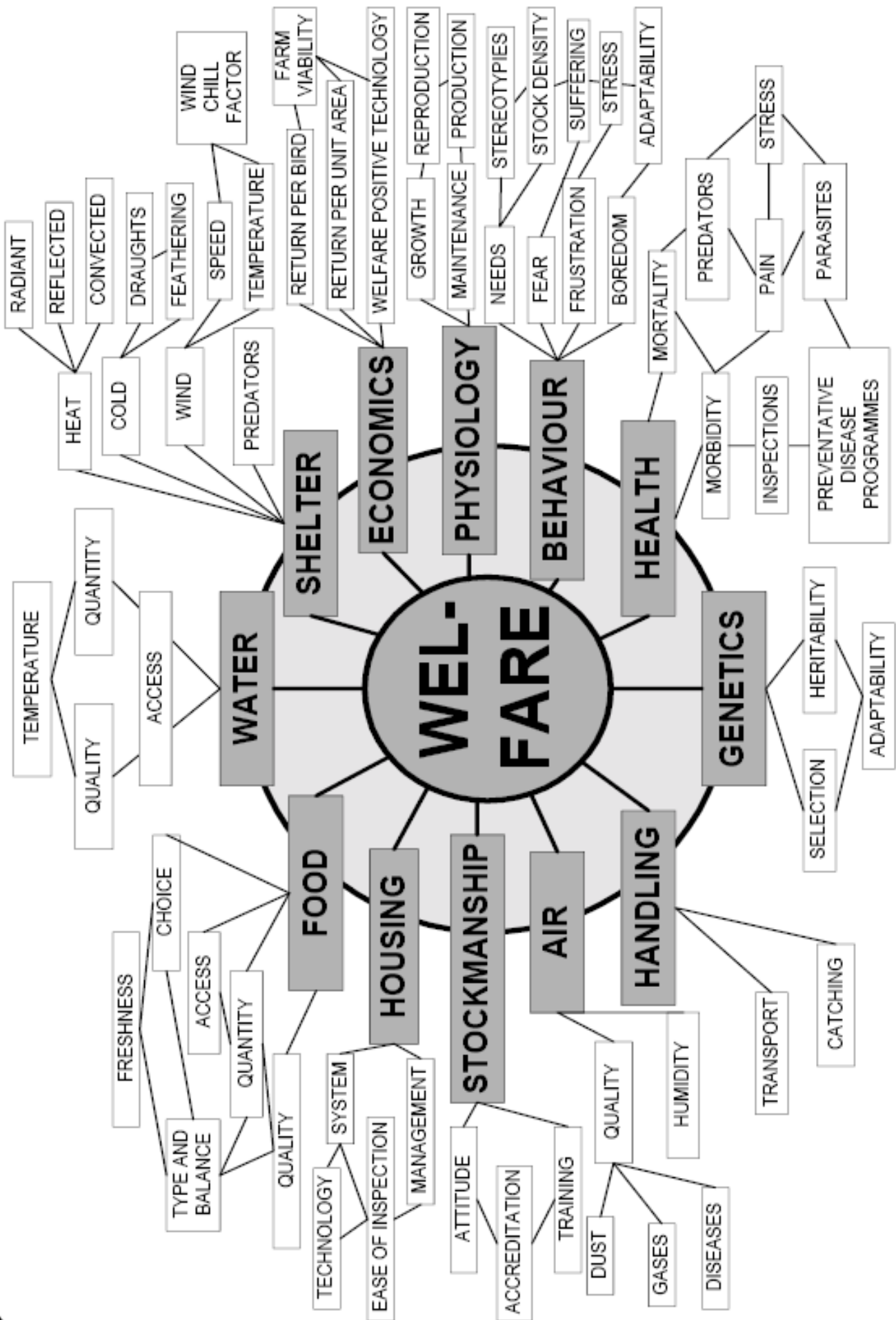
“It may never be possible to provide an ideal system because increasing the opportunities for behavioural freedom (for example) may unavoidably increase the risk of transmission of certain diseases, or the risk of injury” LayWel, 2006

European Perspective

- Based on the “Five Freedoms”
 1. Freedom from hunger & thirst
 2. Freedom from discomfort
 3. Freedom from pain, injury & disease
 4. Freedom to express normal behaviour
 5. Freedom from fear & distress
- Strong focus on “freedom to express normal behaviour”
- Critical of conventional cages
- Appears to be heavily influenced by subjective assumptions relating to layer hen behavioural needs rather than objective scientific evidence

Australian Industry Perspective

- Research on welfare should be placed into context i.e objective vs subjective research and assessment
- Further research is required to establish the relative importance of particular behavioural needs
- Behavioral needs must be considered in relation to physiological, health and production indicators of welfare
- Hen welfare is highly dependant on levels of animal husbandry and not confined simply to issues of housing systems



AECL welfare activities

- R&D investments on behalf of the Australian egg industry and the community
- Key welfare priorities
 - Evaluate welfare issues and develop strategies that address identified problem areas and enhance layer hen welfare
 - Identify objective measures of layer hen welfare

AECL welfare research activities 2000 - 2007

- Committed ~ \$2 million to welfare research (8 projects)
 - Comparative welfare across housing systems
 - Welfare in furnished cages
 - Improving moulting & beak trimming practices
 - Physiological stress assessment
- ~\$3 million on poultry health and disease management research
- Core partner of the Australian Poultry CRC funding welfare-based research through one of three key research program areas



HEN WELFARE

ADVISORY GROUP



HEN WELFARE
ADVISORY GROUP

Hen Welfare Advisory Group



- panel of independent animal welfare, veterinary and egg industry advisors
- guide research & communications from AECL on animal welfare with respect to egg production in Australia



HEN WELFARE
ADVISORY GROUP

Hen Welfare Advisory Group



Members:

- Dr Clive Jackson, BVSc PhD, Veterinarian and Research Scientist
- Prof Paul Hemsworth BAgSc (Hons) PhD, Director, Animal Welfare Science Centre
- A/Prof John Barnett PhD, Stress Physiologist and Principle Scientist, DPI Victoria
- Mr Phillip Szepe, Egg Producer, Kinross Farm Pty Ltd



HEN WELFARE
ADVISORY GROUP

Hen Welfare Advisory Group



AUSTRALIAN EGG®
CORPORATION LIMITED

- Provide expert consultation to industry on animal welfare
- Identify areas for further research and development in the area of hen welfare under Australian conditions
- Prepare positioning statements on hen welfare in each of the housing systems used by the Australian egg industry
- Sign off on key messages on hen housing for communication with the Australian public and media
- Validate communications going to the wider community, including the production of fact sheets on welfare for distribution to media, food industry and the AECL website
- Provide expert opinion to the media



Communications



- Published scientific literature review on hen welfare
- Consumer fact sheets outlining the advantages and disadvantages of each production system in use in Australia
- ‘Q&A’ paper addressing the main misconceptions in the Australian community surrounding hen welfare
- Comprehensive hen welfare information on the AECL website, including MPEG videos of production systems, stills, Q&As, fact sheets and links for further information
- Finalised video and audio news release on hen welfare in the Australian egg industry

Welfare assurance in the egg industry

- Egg Corp Assured (ECA)
- National quality assurance program
- HACCP based
- Independently audited
- Animal health & welfare, biosecurity food safety, environmental management, labelling



CERTIFICATION™
0000

