

# Enriched cage gets consumer nod

By ROD SMITH

**G**ENERALLY, U.S. adults who buy eggs do not object to buying eggs from cage housing systems, but when provided with side-by-side comparisons, they do like the concept of an alternative, "enriched" system like aviary or colony cage housing, according to a survey conducted for the United Egg Producers (UEP).

Although 24% of adults surveyed said cage housing is okay, 32% said if they were to make the call, they would select the alternative system for producers in their states, the survey found. Forty-four percent said they would select cage-free housing.

The results of the survey were to be presented to egg producers attending the UEP board meeting this week in Washington, D.C., along with additional research showing the kinds of eggs consumers actually buy and the prices they pay for eggs (story, page 1). An advance copy was provided to *Feedstuffs*.

## Independent work

The survey was conducted by Bantam Group, a public opinion firm based in Atlanta, Ga.

In the survey, Bantam first asked, without providing any information about conventional cage operations, how people felt about the current hen housing system, and although one-third of respondents said this system is cruel, two-thirds were in a range from "neither cruel nor humane" to "very humane."

Of those who put the system in the cruel category, most (79%) objected to how crowded birds are in cages, and 12% said cages are too dirty and unsanitary.

Of those who said the system is neither cruel nor humane, most (31%) didn't know why they felt that way, 10% said it's just not an issue for them and 5% said the issue is not humane treatment but bad versus good producers.

Of those who said the sys-

## Key Points

- Survey finds support for several kinds of housing.
- Results offer information on which to make housing system decisions.

tem is humane, most (41%) said hens are adequately/well cared for in cages, 16% said hens are cared for humanely and not harmed in cages and 4% said federal regulations ensure humane, safe treatment.

Bantam then described cage, cage-free and alternative housing, providing pros and cons and photos of each kind of system. Each was presented separately, and questions were asked about one before moving on to the next.

UEP did not seek to influence the pros and cons given, spokesman Mitch Head told *Feedstuffs*. Rather, Bantam developed the language from industry, activist and other web sites, he said.

For instance, cage housing pros described how modern cages keep hens healthy and safe, provide optimal feed, water and space and result in high-quality eggs, while cage housing cons described an inability for hens to perform natural behaviors and a size-of-a-sheet-of-paper reference to space.

Conversely, cage-free pros included the ease for hens to perform natural behaviors, and cons included greater costs and environmental footprints associated with cage-free systems.

This research was undertaken to capture public opinion about hen housing systems for egg production to help producers make strategic decisions about their businesses, including possibly transitioning to a different kind of housing, Head explained.

"We wanted to give producers a fair look, not one that would have been biased" if UEP had sought to shape the survey, he said.

Head is with GolinHarris, UEP's public relations consultant.

## Grandin favors enriched cage

**ANIMAL** welfare specialist Temple Grandin at Colorado State University told a conference last month that egg farmers need to consider moving to "enriched" cage housing similar to what's being adopted in Europe.

Grandin said conventional cage housing systems do not offer hens sufficient room to express natural behaviors, whereas enriched cages provide space for them to lie down, spread their wings and turn around, as well as providing nests, perches and scratching areas.

However, she also cautioned that standards cannot become so strict that costs increase so much that

eggs become unaffordable for low-income people and that producers can't stay in business, in which case the U.S. may need to source eggs from other countries.

Grandin said the European model is a good option, and "that's where producers need to head."

Work is underway at Michigan State University and the University of California-Davis to jointly evaluate the various production systems for laying hens. Enriched cages are among those being evaluated, but researchers said actual science is needed to know what is best for the birds.

— By ROD SMITH



**HEN HOUSES:** A survey examined public opinion regarding hen housing systems for egg production, including cage housing, cage-free housing (pictured) and a third "alternative" system.

## Good third system

After receiving the presentation about cage housing, 16% of respondents said modern cage housing is "appropriate" and needs no changes, and 37% said both the cage and cage-free presentations made good points, but until "a better system comes along," modern cage housing is acceptable, making 53% of respondents okay with modern cage housing.

Forty-seven percent said cages "must be replaced."

After receiving the cage-free

presentation, 27% of respondents said modern cage housing is appropriate, 33% said they "could go either way" and 40% said modern cage housing "must be replaced."

The alternative housing presentation basically used European "enriched" cage housing that provides hens with more space, nests, perches, scratching areas and other enrichments as a reference point.

After receiving this presentation, 23% of respondents still said modern cage hous-

ing is appropriate, 42% said they could go either way and 35% said modern cage housing "must be replaced with this alternative housing system."

Head said the UEP project was not about choosing between cage and cage-free housing but identifying differences in public opinion among several systems.

Accordingly, he said, the alternative system appears to be "a good third system to include in the mix." ■

# Egg purchases studied

• From page 1

## Choice

The IRI data found that 92% of all eggs consumers purchased in retail stores in 2009 were from cage operations, just 2% were from cage-free operations and only 1% were from free-range/organic operations (Figure). The remaining 5% of eggs were other specialty eggs, and the percentages were unchanged from 2008.

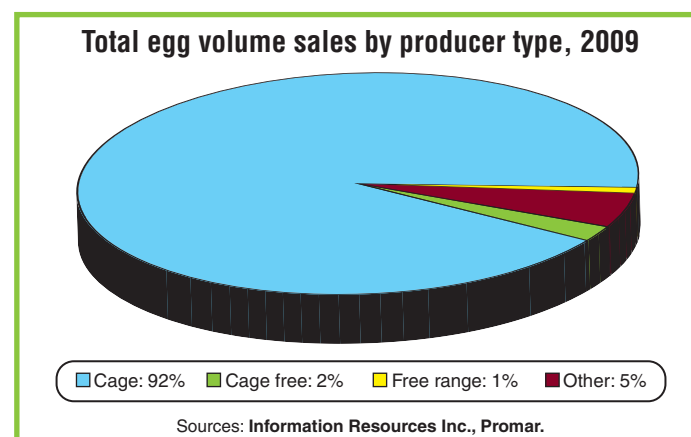
"Our farmers produce all of these kinds of eggs," UEP president Gene Gregory said.

He emphasized that UEP's position always has been that consumers should be free to choose the kind of egg they want to buy based on their ability to pay and their own personal opinions.

Gregory said "it's disturbing" that animal rights activists are trying to force restaurant and retail companies to take away that choice by making them buy eggs from only cage-free operations.

The data "clearly indicate that consumers, given a choice, prefer regular eggs over other kinds of eggs by an overwhelming majority," he said.

The IRI report notes that the average cost on April 30 for a dozen large-sized eggs from hens housed in mod-



ern cage systems was \$1.10, while cage-free eggs cost almost three times more at \$2.99/doz. and free-range/organic eggs cost almost four times more at \$4.38/doz.

## Competitive

Also to be presented to the UEP meeting is an analysis by Promar International, an economic consulting firm based in Washington, that found that American egg farmers are the most competitive in the world.

In August 2009, American consumers paid \$1.63/doz. for eggs — based on a weighted average of regular, cage-free and free-range eggs — whereas consumers paid \$5.81/doz. for eggs in Lux-

embourg, \$5.76 in Denmark, \$4.89 in the U.K. and \$2.79 elsewhere in the Eurozone.

Promar said this difference is because of the efficiencies and large size of American egg farms versus in Europe and other parts of the world.

Promar also noted that European regulations require that European producers transition to "enriched" cage housing that provides hens with more space, nests, perches, scratching areas and other enrichments and suggested that this may cause "severe egg shortages and higher prices for eggs (in Europe) in the coming years."

UEP, based in Atlanta, Ga., represents 97% of all egg farmers in the U.S. ■