

Development of the Model Code of Practice for the Welfare of Animals – Domestic Poultry 4th Edition

When the current version of the Code was approved by the Primary Industries Ministerial Council and printed in 2002, it was scheduled for review in 2010. It was a development of an earlier version of the Model Code. It is essential for the free range sector of the egg industry to ensure that intensive production standards are not adopted in place of the extensive requirements of the current code. There is no science behind high density free range proposals (other than the certainty of increased profits). No scientific review of production processes has been undertaken to demonstrate that the standards contained within the current voluntary Model Code are no longer applicable to the industry. The stocking density of 1500 hens per hectare for free range hens was developed by applying well established principles of agronomy. The issue of the upper limit on the long term stocking rate was debated strongly at the time, following pressure from local Councils and the EPA about how some farms were operating. The experience of people who had farmed free range layers in the 1950's and 60's, when all egg production was based on free range principles. Hens were often run under citrus trees. It was recognised that for an operation to be sustainable, the stocking rate had to be low - less than 300 birds/acre (750/hectare). It was agreed that such a system should be regarded as Free Range egg production and the hens were to have access to the range during daylight hours. There was some dispute by new entrants to the industry who believed that they could design pasture rotation systems around their sheds that would allow higher rates. So it was decided to take an empirical approach and work out what the maximum stocking rate could be to avoid the measurable negative impacts of nutrient run off and soil degradation and still be theoretically possible to maintain pasture cover and avoid the issue of dust. Some argued that as most hens were in sheds at night and may be locked in for part of the day so that only a portion of the hens actually entered the range area, the impact is lessened. The dairy industry was very big at that time and local agronomists had data on the effects of applying very high rates of poultry manure on irrigated pasture. The agronomists studied the data on the maximum nutrient uptake a well maintained irrigated pasture could support and also avoid the problems of salinity build up observed in the dairy pastures. The stocking rate was calculated and a stocking density of up to 600 birds/acre (1500/hectare) was regarded as the maximum possible for long term sustainability. At the time the Code was approved, it was accepted that to maintain consumer credibility, visitors or passers-by had to see the birds out and about on the range. It was also accepted that there is no valid animal management need to lock in the layers in the morning or during inclement weather. Those currently involved in free range egg production agree that the fundamental elements of the Model Code, or other regulations introduced by Governments should be: □ a maximum stocking density of 1500 hens per hectare; □ stocking density must be reduced in conditions where pasture or other vegetative cover cannot be maintained at the maximum stocking density; □ no beak trimming of hens is permitted except when other methods of controlling outbreaks of severe feather pecking or cannibalism have been tried and failed (using the same criteria in the current Model Code); and □ pullets must be allowed to range freely once they are fully feathered (about six weeks old). **Free Range Egg & Poultry Association of Australia Inc. October 2012**