

# The Eggs Files

Understanding what all those egg labels really mean

BY KATHY KAVANAGH

In Canada, the laws that exist around egg labelling are too often unclear—leaving many concerned consumers to puzzle over the difference, if there is any, between the dozens of cartons on their grocery store shelf. What does it mean when eggs are labelled “free run” or “organic”? Just how bad are “regular” eggs, really?

The answer: pretty bad. Currently, an estimated 95 percent of eggs produced in Canada come from hens confined to battery cages. These cages deny hens their most fundamental behavioural needs, such as nesting, foraging, dust-bathing, wing-flapping, and perching. However, the marketplace is changing. In B.C., for example, demand for “cage-free” eggs is on the rise and production can't keep pace. “There is a reason why demand for cage-free eggs is growing,” says Leanne McConnachie, director of the Vancouver Humane Society's farm animal programs. “Consumers were previously unaware of how the majority of our eggs were produced, but now that they know they are making the more humane choice.”

Still not convinced you should shell out the extra cash? Here's what the labels mean, so you can make an informed choice.

HOUSING SYSTEM	BARN FEATURES	SPACE PROVISIONS PER BIRD (CM <sup>2</sup> )
<b>CONVENTIONAL EGGS</b>	Hens are housed in battery cages—rows of wire cages stacked on top of one another, where four to six hens occupy each individual cage. Birds' beaks are usually “trimmed” using a hot blade or laser.	National Farm Animal Care Council Code of Practice recommendation*: 432 (typical white-egg layer) 483 (typical brown-egg layer)
<b>FREE-RUN</b>	Birds roam freely inside a barn without outdoor access. Barns are equipped with nest boxes, but may still be crowded. Birds on wires or slats have no litter to scratch or dust bathe. Perches may or may not be available. Birds' beaks are usually trimmed.	National Farm Animal Care Council Code of Practice recommendation*: Wire/slatted flooring: 850 (typical white-egg layer) 950 (typical brown-egg layer) Litter flooring: 1,700 (typical white-egg layer) 1,900 (typical brown-egg layer)
<b>FREE-RANGE</b>	Similar to free-run except hens have access to outdoor runs, weather permitting. Birds' beaks are usually trimmed.	Same as free-run when hens are indoors.

\* Some conventional producers follow the National Farm Animal Care Council's “Recommended Code of Practice for the Care and Handling of Layers” (COP), which is a voluntary standard. In reality, space per hen and cage size varies depending on the producer.