



Cage-free eggs: A comparison of labels

Introduction

The vast majority of Canada's eggs – an estimated 98 percent – are “cage eggs” from hens kept in cramped wire **battery cages**. Birds in cages are unable to perform natural behaviours such as nesting, perching, dust bathing, stretching a wing or walking around – activities important to them. These conditions are widespread industry practices, so are sanctioned in the *National Code of Practice for the Care and Handling of Pullets, Layers and Spent Fowl*.¹

Alternatives to battery cages exist. These alternatives have great potential, but consumers should be aware not all of these alternatives to battery eggs are certified by a third party.

Free range eggs

Free-range eggs are from hens kept in open barns, usually with access to nest boxes for laying their eggs, and access to the outdoors at least some of the time. Housing systems for free-range eggs, unless certified organic, are *not* audited or third-party verified.

Housing systems do not necessarily provide more space than battery hen cages, nor are they required to provide nest boxes, perches or litter for dust bathing.

Free run eggs

Free-run eggs, also known as “barn eggs”, are from hens kept in open barns, usually with access to nests to lay their eggs. As with uncertified free-range egg systems, free-run systems do not necessarily provide more space than battery cages and are not required to provide nest boxes, perches or litter for dust bathing. The birds have no access to the outdoors.

Free-run eggs are not audited or verified by third-party inspectors.

¹ The voluntary code is industry-driven. A copy is available on the National Farm Animal Care Council's Website, www.nfacc.ca.

Verified Systems of cage-free eggs

Verified systems of cage-free eggs include *certified organic and BC SPCA Certified* (available in parts of Canada). There are other labelled eggs, such as Omega, but hens producing these specialty eggs are **kept in cages** and fed special diets. In Ontario, *Local Food Plus* is a local food initiative which includes cage-free eggs as a program component.

Space allotted each hen varies greatly among housing options. See Table 1 below for space comparisons.

Only certified organic eggs, BC SPCA Certified eggs and Local Food Plus (in Ontario) are **verified by third-party auditors**. The others, including free run and free-range, are unregulated, and are not audited² to ensure specific space allowances for hens.

Recently, the Canadian Food Inspection Agency has been looking at egg labelling, though no regulations concerning use of the terms, “free-range” and “free-run”, are in place. Given the confusing array of eggs on Canadian grocery shelves – most not audited or third-party verified – a program of regulated labelling-standards is needed for *all* eggs, to benefit consumers. The European Union requires labelling for eggs according to the hens’ housing system, including the designation, “eggs from caged hens”, from birds kept in cages.

Certified organic eggs

The Canadian organic industry, in general, has been growing at a rate of 15 to 20 percent annually for the past decade with approximately 3,670 certified organic farms in 2004.³ Eggs are one type of organic product.

As a result of pressure from trading partners, including the European Union and the United States, Canada has developed **Canada’s National Organic Standard**, developed by the Canadian General Standards Board.⁴ The standards are being phased in currently. The standards for animals cover feed, transport and handling, health care, living conditions, stocking rates, etc. Operators are to provide animals with access to the outdoors, shade, rotational pasture, exercise areas, fresh air and natural daylight suitable to the species, the stage of production, the climate and environment, and opportunity to express normal patterns of behaviour.

Currently, only British Columbia and Quebec have regulations in place governing organic

²Under supply management, provincial egg marketing boards reportedly carry out inspections of egg producers to ensure numbers of birds do not exceed owned quota. The marketing boards do not provide the results of these confidential visits.

³ Canada Gazette, Part II, December 21, 2006, Extra Vol. 140, No. 6, “Organic Products Regulations”, <http://canadagazette.gc.ca/partII/2006/20061221-x6/html/extra-e.html>

⁴The standard is available on the Web: http://www.pwgsc.gc.ca/cgsb/on_the_net/organic/index-e.html

production systems.⁵ For the remaining provinces, voluntary systems are relied upon.⁶

Certified organic eggs require independent third-party inspection and certification by a certifying body (CB). There are numerous brands of certified organic eggs sold in Canada, and numerous certifying bodies. Certifying bodies call on independent auditors to carry out inspections, with auditors free to set their fees and accept assignments from various organic certifying bodies. Certification status is determined by an arm length's review panel. Inspectors do not make the final judgement.

Two organic certifying bodies frequently seen in Canada are Quality Assurance International (QAI) and OCPP/Pro-Cert Canada Inc.

Some certifying bodies are for-profit organizations and may hold their member farmers to different standards than non-profit certifying bodies.

Organic products must meet the requirements set out in the *Consumer Packaging and Labelling Act*, the *Food and Drugs Act*, and all other applicable legislation.⁷

British Columbia SPCA certified standards for raising and handling laying hens

The BC SPCA standards are based on the “*Five Freedoms for farm animals*”⁸ and were written in consultation with specialists in animal science, agriculture, ethology and veterinary medicine. Third-party auditors assure consumers the hens’ treatment conforms to BC SPCA Certified Standards program. Certification status is determined by an arm’s length review panel.

The BC SPCA standard is more stringent than the *National code of practice for the care and handling of pullets, layers and spent fowl*, published by the Canadian Agricultural Research Council.⁹ The code of practice is industry-written and essentially voluntary, and reflects current industry practices, including wide-spread use of battery cages.

The BC SPCA standards (last updated November 2005) cover feed and water, environment (including housing), health and sanitation, management, waste management, transport and handling, slaughter, processing and euthanasia, biosecurity and reference materials.

⁵In BC, organic regulation is enforced by the Certified Organic Associations of BC (COABC), which has decided to adopt the National Standard as their own, effective December 2008 (See <http://www.certifiedorganic.bc.ca/Standards/>). The province of Québec has an organic regulation deemed equivalent to the National Standard (Conseil d’accreditation du Québec [CAQ]).

⁶Canada Gazette, Part II, December 21, 2006.

⁷Canada Gazette, Part II, December 21, 2006.

⁸The “Five Freedoms” are freedom from hunger and thirst, from discomfort, from pain, injury and disease, from distress, and the ability to express normal behaviours that promote well-being.

⁹The National Farm Animal Care Council (NFACC) is taking over responsibility for the codes of practice. Their Web address is www.nfacc.ca.

Among key components of the program for layers are:

- Sufficient space to move freely, preen, stretch, and flap wings
- Freedom from battery cages
- Provision of nest boxes, perches, and dust bathing areas
- Prohibition of stressful forced moulting practices

Copies of the standards are available on request from the BC SPCA.¹⁰

Local Food Plus

Local Food Plus is an audited, Toronto-based local food initiative which has **cage-free eggs** as one component of their program. Their certified farmers work to:

- Employ sustainable production systems that:
 - * Reduce or eliminate synthetic pesticides and fertilizers;
 - * Avoid the use of hormones, antibiotics and genetic engineering; and
 - * Conserve soil and water.
- Provide safe and fair working conditions for on-farm labour.
- Provide healthy and humane care for livestock.
- Protect and enhance wildlife habitat and biodiversity on working farm landscapes.
- Reduce food-related energy consumption and greenhouse gas emissions through energy conservation, recycling, minimal packaging, and local sales.¹¹

Farmers have flexibility within the program to use a range of practices, based on an assessment of what is most suitable for their operation. Farmers must accumulate 75% of the available base points from their practices to be LFP approved. LFP-certified farmers may select programs from the full menu, and be LFP-certified, yet not be producers of cage-free eggs. In turn, an institution can be LFP-Certified, but not use cage-free eggs.

Animal production standards under the LFP program prohibit feeding animal by-products, use of prophylactic hormones and antibiotics (other than to treat specific conditions), and require animals to be kept equivalent to **BC SPCA standards** for handling and raising farm animals.¹² There is no arm's length review panel, however.

¹⁰The BC SPCA's Website is www.sPCA.bc.ca. Their address is BC SPCA Provincial Office, 1245 East 7th Avenue, Vancouver, BC, V5T 1R1, Phone 604.681.7271 or 1.800.665.1868 toll-free within BC, Fax 604.681.7022.

¹¹See <http://www.localfoodlus.ca/>

¹²Farmers meeting either certified organic or BC SPCA standards or equivalent receive 125 points under the LFP program. Bonus points are available where farmers clearly go beyond existing organic certification requirements (e.g., doubling the period before a calf is weaned, or providing surrogate mothers to calves, up to a maximum of 40 points.)

Table 1 – Space provisions for adult laying hens¹³

Jurisdiction ¹⁴	Recommended standards		Enforced standards				
	Canada (Code of practice)	USA (United Egg Producers)	McDonald's USA	Burger King USA	European Union	BC SPCA Certified	Certified Organic (COABC) ¹⁵
Space allowance (cm ² /hen)	432 ¹⁶ 483 ¹⁷ 1700 ¹⁸ 850 ¹⁹ 1900 ²⁰ 950 ²¹	432 ²²	464	484	550/750	1900	2323

¹³Based in part on a table from www.sPCA.bc.ca/farminfo/poultry.asp

¹⁴All jurisdictions use battery cages as the norm except BC SPCA and COABC. Canada's voluntary Code of Practice provides recommended standards for both caged and cage-free layers. An estimated 98 percent of layers in Canada are kept in cages, as noted in footnotes 16-19 below.

¹⁵The Canadian Organic Standard (COS) currently does not specify space requirements for different species as does the COABC standard. However, a COS task force is currently developing standards for individual species for future incorporation in the standard.

¹⁶Cage space for a white-egg layer (Canada's voluntary Code of Practice)

¹⁷Cage space for a typical brown-egg layer (Canada's voluntary Code of Practice)

¹⁸Minimum floor space for free-run white egg-layer on litter, unless there is good use of cubic space in the barn, in which case the figure does not apply. (Canada's voluntary Code of Practice)

¹⁹Minimum floor space for free-run white egg-layer on wire or slats, unless there is good use of cubic space in the barn, in which case the figure does not apply. (Canada's voluntary Code of Practice)

²⁰Minimum floor space for free-run brown egg-layer on litter, unless there is good use of cubic space in the barn, in which case the figure does not apply. (Canada's voluntary Code of Practice)

²¹Minimum floor space for free-run brown egg-layer on wire or slats, unless there is good use of cubic space in the barn, in which case the figure does not apply. (Canada's voluntary Code of Practice)

²²UEP recommendation for 2008