room for change

GROUNDBREAKING CALIFORNIA LAW AND SHIFTING CONSUMER DEMAND INSPIRE THIS FARMER TO GO CAGE-FREE. WILL THE REST OF THE INDUSTRY FOLLOW?

BY EMILY SMITH
SOMETIMES FRANK HILLIKER gets out of bed at 3 a.m. just to watch his hens wake up. Coffee in hand, he walks down to House 5 in the darkened quiet and waits. The soft automated lights switch on, feathered heads pop up here and there, and a chorus begins to build of clucks and click-click-clicks of clawed feet moving about on metal perches.

It’s breakfast time.

At exactly 4:05 a.m., the churning of the feed auger sends the hens into a frenzy of activity as the morning’s first meal rolls out.

Hilliker, a third-generation egg farmer, studies his hens’ morning routine, shaking his head at their antics. His family has been caring for chickens since 1942, but never like this. For 70 years, Hilliker’s Ranch Fresh Eggs just outside San Diego raised chickens in cages. A California law called Proposition 2 is changing that.

“Chickens in cages, they don’t act like this, you know; they wake up, eat, drink, eat, drink, poop, lay an egg.” That’s it.

With huge support from a coalition of animal protection groups, led by The HSUS, Prop 2 overwhelmingly passed in 2008, making California the fifth state to ban gestation crates for pigs, the third to ban veal crates and the first to eliminate battery cages—small cages that give egg-laying hens little room to move. The law, which went into effect Jan. 1, 2015, requires egg producers to give their chickens enough space to spread their wings, stand up and turn around.

Hilliker and his sister, Lara Woliung, are transitioning all five henhouses on their ranch to cage-free. House 5, their first aviary, opened in 2014. They plan to open House 4 in August.

With the new setup, Hilliker has learned a lot about his hens’ natural behavior. It’s completely different than the behavior of caged hens, he says, and in the beginning, it was baffling. They socialize and form cliques, they investigate people who come into the house with a nosy peck on the foot, and they stick to routines—anticipating each mealtime and often roosting in the same spot high in the rafters night after night.

“It’s been a whole new way of farming; it’s been pretty invigorating,” says Hilliker, who is considering taking his flock free-range in the next five years. “For me, because it was such a new challenge in learning how to do all this, it’s made farming fun again.”

That’s the power of Prop 2, the largest agricultural statement made by The HSUS to date, says Paul Shapiro, vice president of the HSUS Farm Animal Protection Campaign.

More than seven years ago, fresh off successful initiatives in Florida, Arizona and other states, Shapiro’s team and other groups set their sights on improving the
lives of farm animals in California. Getting the measure passed in the country’s top state for agriculture was no easy feat: About 4,000 volunteers gathered more than half a million signatures to get it on the ballot; an army of advocates then helped educate voters through powerful advertising campaigns, including flyers they passed out at farmers markets and more.

“This was the first time chickens were up at bat, and it wasn’t in a small egg production state; it was in a giant egg production state with 19 million hens,” Shapiro says.

At the time, Shapiro predicted a successful vote would set in motion nationwide reform. It did.

California’s legislators went on to require that all shell eggs sold in the state, regardless of where they were produced, meet the Prop 2 standards—an important national signal, given the size of California’s market. Michigan banned battery cages in 1999 and gave egg producers 12 years to phase them out. During that time, consumer demand shifted steadily toward more humanely raised products. Happy Egg executives believed the U.S. market would respond to Prop 2 the same way, and it looks as if they might be right.

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“It’s a better environment for the hen, he says, “and it’s certainly a happier environment for [the farmer] than going into a barn and seeing chickens with no feathers on them. … You can surely be passionate about something with high animal welfare rather than something that weighs on your conscience all of the time, which can be quite uncomfortable.”

“Prop 2 has, is and will positively change egg farming,” says Happy Egg chief operating officer David Wagstaff. Its provisions will eventually become “the new normal,” he says. After all, that’s exactly what happened in Happy Egg’s home country. Europe banned battery cages in 1999 and gave egg producers 12 years to phase them out. During that time, consumer demand shifted steadily toward more humanely raised products. Happy Egg executives believed the U.S. market would respond to Prop 2 the same way, and it looks as if they might be right.

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the way Hilliker cares for his chickens. The company that designed the system taught him how to manage it and create a schedule for the flock: when to feed them, when to gather eggs, when to turn the lights down to encourage sleep and when to bring them up to start the day. It was like starting from scratch, he says, but he was eager to learn.

“I gotta learn how the system works; I gotta learn the bird behavior,” says Hilliker, who persuaded the company to donate a section of chicken housing to the local high school’s agriculture program so students could learn, too. “In the beginning, I was here when they were waking up and going to bed. Every day, seven days a week. You gotta learn; I don’t want to be a bad farmer.”

Instead of food being delivered by hand twice a day to cage troughs, augers churn feed onto two levels of the aviary six times a day. Instead of manure piling up underneat h cages, a conveyor belt on each aviary row carries waste to the end of the 184-foot building, where it’s cleared away for folks to buy as fertilizer.

While chickens naturally want to lay their eggs in a dark, quiet spot, birds in tiny cages have no choice. The hens in House 5 have two rows of nesting boxes, each with its own privacy door, though they needed a little help learning how to use it.

Ropes of bright orange LED lights line the areas above and below the boxes to discourage laying. When the hens moved in, Hilliker and Nyland walked through 16 times a day to gather hundreds of misplaced eggs and tuck them into the boxes, showing the birds where they should lay.

It took a few weeks, but now the hens have the hang of it. Nyland still walks through four times a day, looking for wayward eggs — now finding only a few dozen — and for any signs of trouble with the hens or with the system.

On one walkthrough, he spots a bird who seems to have dust irritating her eye. He gently tucks her under his arm and finishes his round before taking her to the sick pen, where she’ll get medical attention and return to the flock when she’s well. On most factory farms, where producers manage millions of hens, she likely would have gone unnoticed and untreated.

“You gotta take care of the animals,”

Prop 2 and Its Ripple Effects

Several key victories for farm animals helped set the stage for Prop 2. After it passed, other bans on extreme confinement and changes in the egg industry spread nationwide.

2007 and earlier


2008

Prop 2 passes in California, and Colorado bans both gestation and veal crates.

2009

Michigan bans gestation crates, veal crates and battery cages. Maine prohibits gestation and veal crates.

2010

California announces it will outlaw the sale of whole eggs from caged hens, regardless of where they were produced.
Nyland says.

There’s at least one catch to working in the new cage-free environment, he jokes as he points to the spots on the back of his pale blue Hilliker logosed shirt: “They can poop on you.”

**HILLIKER AND HIS SISTER** grew up hand-collecting eggs, just as their parents and grandparents did. But the aviary changed that, too.

When a hen lays her egg in the nesting box, it rolls down a slight slope onto a conveyor belt protected inside the aviary. With a flip of a switch, the belt moves all the eggs out to a table where someone sorts them.

The technology took some adjusting.

The first time Hilliker’s mother, Lisa, turned on the conveyor, “it was like Lucy in the candy factory,” she says, her arms waving frantically. “Here come white eggs and brown eggs, you know, all together, and we had to separate them.”

It turns out there’s a knob to slow that belt down, she says, with a sheepish shrug. On this day Nyland is at the controls, deftly sorting a steady stream of eggs. White eggs on one tray, brown eggs on another, cracked or flawed eggs in a bucket, small eggs on this tray and super jumbos—“a secret item” at the ranch store, Nyland says—on that one.

When the conveyor is empty, Nyland moves the rolling rack of eggs up to the packaging room. There they’ll be scrubbed, checked for cracks and imperfections, graded by weight, packaged, labeled and sent out to grocery stores, restaurants and other businesses. Some get set aside for the weekend’s farmers markets and others are stocked in the refrigerated cases inside the packaging room, which doubles as the store.

People stop in all day for eggs; some have been customers for decades. Others, like Kara Richter, come because of the cage-free house.

Richter lives nearby. She supports local

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**2011**
Unilever becomes the first major food manufacturer to commit to using only cage-free eggs in its products; and Ohio prohibits the construction of new battery-cage facilities.

**2012**
Burger King, Dunkin’ Brands and Harris Teeter Supermarkets switch to cage-free eggs. Rhode Island bans gestation and veal crates.

**2013**
Marriott International and Au Bon Pain announce plans to switch to cage-free eggs.

**2014**
Starbucks, Nestle, Centerplate and Delaware North Companies make cage-free announcements, while Unilever becomes the first company to work with the global egg industry to end its killing of male chicks. Kentucky bans gestation crates.

**2015**
Sodexo, Aramark and Compass Group, three of the world’s largest food service providers, announce they will all transition to cage-free eggs.
Comparison of Four Systems for Laying Hens

BATTERY CAGE: On average, each caged laying hen has only 67 square inches of cage space—less space than this page on which to live her entire life. These hens are unable to even spread their wings.

ENRICHED CAGE: These cages typically include a nest box, perch and a litter area for dustbathing. They are larger than battery cages, but still only give each hen 116 square inches of room.

CAGE-FREE: These birds have room to walk and spread their wings and can hop up to perch and lay their eggs in nests. California farmer Frank Hilliker estimates that each of his cage-free hens has about 3 square feet, or 432 square inches.

FREE-RANGE: Birds are uncaged and have outdoor access, although the USDA doesn’t regulate quality or quantity. Hens at the Happy Egg Co. live mostly outdoors, and each has about 14 square feet of room, or 2016 square inches.

FOR MORE INFORMATION on how to read egg carton labels, go to humansociety.org/egglabels.

A battery cage hen spends her entire life in a space this small.
confinement has no future.” Right now Rose Acre keeps 350,000 of its roughly 25 million hens in cage-free housing and will increase that number as the company adds new houses and replaces old ones.

Consumers can continue to drive changes like these by asking retailers and restaurants such as McDonald’s and Walmart why they’re still selling eggs from caged hens, says Shapiro.

“If we demand higher standards, there will be a supply,” says Mahi Klosterhalfen, CEO and president of the Albert Schweitzer Foundation, an animal protection organization in Germany.

Along with Wagstaff, Klosterhalfen believes that mandatory egg labeling would dramatically improve the welfare of America’s hens. Before label regulations were introduced in Germany in 2004, 90 percent of all eggs sold in the country came from caged hens, he says. Within a couple of years, that number dropped to 50 percent, and by 2008, consumer demand and animal protection groups, including Klosterhalfen’s, had persuaded nearly all German grocery stores to stop selling eggs from caged hens.

“Prop 2 [proves] that legal progress is also possible in the U.S.,” he says, “and that the arguments of factory farmers against this progress are invalid.”

**SUNLIGHT IS FAADING** at the Hilliker ranch in California, and the boisterous clucks in House 5 have quieted into a murmur. The automated lights are slowly dimming, and the rafters are filling with hens, who claim a spot one-by-one.

Hilliker and Nyland, the ranch manager, are here to “tuck them in” for the night. Nyland wears a headlamp as he walks through the house one more time, looking for eggs and lifting a few stragglers onto a perch so they can sleep.

Near Hilliker’s head, a brown leghorn leaps up to take her spot, falters slightly and hops back to the ground. He reaches down to boost her up to the perch, shaking his head, still bemused at his hens’ behavior.

The last hen hops up onto a perch, nests in between the others and tucks her head under her wing before dozing off. Then, just before the house goes dark, the hens fall silent—waiting for tomorrow.

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**How Consumers Can Help**

Following the Three Rs when you make your food choices can ease market pressure for extreme confinement systems. **Reduce or Replace:** Consume fewer animal products or replace them with plant-based items. **Refine:** If you do buy animal products, choose those from sources that adhere to higher animal welfare standards.