

Title: Governing Hen Welfare: Beyond Standards and Guidelines?
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Summary

Animal welfare is emerging as a critical issue within society to which the egg industry, along with other livestock industries, needs to respond. This research aims to build on the extensive literature on animal welfare ethics, hen welfare science, consumer studies, and politics and governance.

While hen welfare has become an important consumer concern, the degree to which the relevant codes, standards and guidelines are informed by science is disputed, and drawbacks with the overall approach suggest that there may be merit in investigating alternative governance arrangements. Consumers, retailers and producers all benefit from clearly established standards and guidelines on what constitutes hen welfare. They also benefit when those standards and guidelines are based on comprehensive science, and do not reflect the views of specific scientific communities.

Participants in standard setting processes need a better understanding of the strengths and weaknesses of science to avoid politicising it in the pursuit of sector interests. The division of animal welfare considerations into an historical dichotomy of 'good' and 'bad' animal welfare is no longer helpful, where segments of consumers desire to act on their values by purchasing products that match those values, and hen welfare practices are deeply contested by producers, consumers and the wider public.

Since consumer choices are based on ethical considerations, a combination of public and private governance to ensure 'truth in labelling' will prove the most effective, efficient and equitable outcome. Science can contribute by providing high-quality information on specific animal welfare issues.

A graduated standard consisting of several levels of welfare is required, to recognise the existence of segmented consumer markets and a demand for animal welfare friendly products. A 'dynamic governance' or 'political modernisation' approach to governance offers the best hope of establishing both a minimum hen welfare standard and a set of graduated standards for different egg production systems that best meets consumers' diverse preferences.