

Free Range Pork Farmers Association Newsletter

November, 2007 "Good, healthy food will only be grown if we demand it"

In the News This Week!

FREE-FOR-ALL
By MEGAN McNAUGHT
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SHOPPERS are buying eggs and pork branded as free range but produced using intensive farming methods.

A lack of laws governing the use of the term 'free range' means that any eggs or pork can be sold using the term.

The industry estimates that less than half the free-range eggs sold in stores would meet consumer expectations.

And consumer watchdog the Australian Competition and Consumer Commission has declared that it is powerless to act.

'There are no fixed standards against which to measure descriptions such as 'free range' and 'bred free range' and, further, we cannot be certain as to the average consumer's understanding of the terms,' the ACCC said in a letter after a complaint from one genuine free-range producer. The lack of laws governing the term means that pork and eggs are being sold at a premium of up to 100 per cent, yet in some cases are from animals housed in large sheds and which scarcely see daylight.

Free-range representatives of the egg and pork industries have now joined forces to call for national standards.

Both say that the credibility of the industry is at stake.

Free-range egg sales now comprise 20 per cent of total sales, with this figure growing by 4 per cent a year.

Free Range Egg and Poultry Association of Australia president and egg producer Ivy Inwood has been campaigning on the issue for years.

'It is very simple: free-range animals should have access to pasture and shelter, and consumers think this is the case,' Mrs Inwood said.

The Free Range Pork Farmers Association recently appealed to the ACCC to regulate farms abusing the system but was told that the ACCC would not get involved because it could not enforce a definition.

Free Range Pork Association president Lee McCosker said the current system was unfair to consumers and animals.

'It should be very strict: pigs must have access to open pasture and shelter at all times, and not be systematically given antibiotics or hormones,' Mr McCosker said.

'People have an image of what free range means when they buy the produce, and they are being misled.'

Victorian Farmers Federation policy council member and egg producer Lou Napolitano said weaker chickens housed in large barns were often pecked to death by stronger chickens, or they were de-beaked.

'Free-range buyers would be horrified ... if we don't do something, they will lose faith in the produce,' Mr Napolitano said.

Full report in this week's The Weekly Times.

Bringing home the bacon

Consumer acceptance of free-range eggs -- buyers are prepared to pay a large premium for eggs from non-caged birds -- is growing for other products. The biggest change is in the push to buy

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pork from outlets which guarantee that the animals have not been housed in the tiny steel stalls common throughout the pig-rearing industry.

Photos released by animal liberationists and former employees of pigs in cavernous industrial halls have shocked authorities and governments, which are now insisting the stalls be at least large enough for a pig to be able to fully lie down.

A meeting of state and federal primary industry ministers in April agreed to a national code to increase the size of the now-miniscule pens. But as in other states, SA pig breeders have five years before the new code comes into force. They fiercely resisted the change, saying it would increase their costs.

A spokesman for agriculture minister Rory McEwen said yesterday that the size of the new stalls would depend on the breed of the pig and other factors. Twenty-four year-old Juliette Lutton says she is "absolutely" prepared to pay more for free-range pork products.

"I'd rather know that pigs live in conditions that I'm not happy with," Juliette said.

"If people saw how pigs are being reared they wouldn't eat it. If you're not prepared to see it then you shouldn't be prepared to eat it."

But Juliette's shopping choices are not wide. Living outside Adelaide, she knows of only one outlet which guarantees their pork products are free-range.

David and Kylie Pedlar run a farm at Warooka, Yorke Peninsula. The Pedlars operate one of the few free range pig farms in South Australia. With over 80,000 pigs free to roam 25,000 acres of land, Mr Pedlar told the Independent Weekly he prefers to rear his animals on open land after working on intensive pig farms.

"I've seen pigs in the crates, it's pretty rough," he said. "Plus, the taste of free range pork is totally different. The stuff you buy in the shops tastes like cardboard compared to free range."

Like other free range pork farmers and butchers, the Pedlars are gearing up for a busy season as the demand for free-range and organic pork increases in the lead-up to Christmas.

Antony Wiles, manager of Haydon's Quality Meats at Burnside Village said more customers are becoming aware of the availability of free-range pork and are willing to pay up to 20 per cent more than for caged pork.

"We sell 2000 per cent more pork at Christmas time," he said. "We're selling to a niche market at the moment, but it's getting bigger."

But Lee McCosker, president of the Free Range Pork Farmers Association said SA has been slower than other states to embrace free-range products. She said pig farmers in NSW and Victoria experienced huge growth in the free-range market and are struggling to keep up with demand.

"Every day, someone learns about intensive farming and voices their disgust," Mrs McCosker said.

"Ninety-five per cent of pigs produced are intensively farmed, which is why it's difficult for us to keep up with demand."

The chair of the SA Farmer's Federation commercial pork section, Butch Moses, said while free-range pork is popular at the moment, the practice may be too expensive for many producers.

"I don't believe it's economically viable. With most operations today, you need a lot of money to buy the land, the water, and the amount of labour needed to run a reasonably sized operation."

Mr Moses said SA pig farmers are under "a fair amount of stress right now" because of high feed prices and the prominence of imported products on supermarket shelves.

However a labelling system, which Mr Moses believes will be rolled out in the next six months, will soon identify meat so consumers know whether the pork they're buying is Australian or not.

"The Australian HomeGrown label will give consumers the right to choose," Mr Moses said. "A lot of smallgoods like ham and bacon are from overseas and people just don't realise that. We're pinning a lot of hope on the labelling system. We believe consumers will be happy to pay a little extra for something that's been made here." -- Bonnie Hallion and Hendrik Gout

The pig numbers are obviously incorrect!

Great Follow up in yesterday's Weekly Times

Single vision for free range

By MEGAN McNAUGHT

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FEDERAL Agriculture Minister Peter McGauran has called for a uniform approach to regulating free-range farming.

Mr McGauran said he would bring state agriculture ministers together to develop a uniform and enforceable approach to the use of the term in labelling.

The move follows a call from egg and pork free-range farmers for strict requirements on producers labelling their products free range.

The Weekly Times last week revealed that shoppers were buying eggs and pork branded as free range but produced using intensive farming methods.

Industry sources say a lack of laws governing the use of the term "free range" means less than half the free-range eggs sold in stores would meet consumer expectations.

Mr McGauran said consumers paid a premium for free range and they had a rightful expectation to get what they paid for.

"We need a consistent approach if consumers are to have confidence in accurate labelling of production methods," Mr McGauran said.

It is the responsibility of state governments to monitor and act on any labelling of products including free-range eggs and pork through their consumer protection laws.

"The states just have to get fair dinkum"

Full report in this week's The Weekly Times.

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Pig Out! Campaign

To ensure that when there is a legal definition of free range that it is actually the one that truly defines free range, and that semi intensive systems are not allowed to fall into this category, we need your help.

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