There is now a broad agreement in the egg industry that clear, legal definitions need to be established for different methods of production.

A national definition for free range egg production is firmly on the agenda and submissions are being made to the Federal Government to implement a standard.

The Free Range Farmers Association in Victoria and the national industry body, Free Range Egg and Poultry Association have been pushing for many years that a national definition should be established for free range production systems which meets consumer expectations.

These arguments have been boosted by the Australian Egg Corporation's managing director, James Kellaway, who has said: “We have definitions that are enforced by the industry but we want to make such definitions more robust and definitive … what we'd like to see is a definition that is clearly enunciated and enforced”

The Free Range Egg and Poultry Association of Australia Inc. welcomes that announcement and has again written to the Minister for Agriculture, Senator Joe Ludwig, re-opening the debate for the development of a clear definition for free range egg production.

The Association has argued that the starting point should be the Model Code of Practice for the Welfare of Animals – Domestic Poultry. The definition should require a maximum outdoor stocking density of 1500 hens per hectare and prohibit the beak trimming or de-beaking of birds.

Currently, many producers who label their eggs as 'free range' run stocking densities well above the 1500 bird limit. AECL has revealed that some farms run as many as 40,000 chickens per hectare.

The Model Code requires producers to find alternative measures to combat feather pecking and cannibalism before resorting to beak trimming – but most farms (even those which claim to be free range) make no attempt to find alternatives. Their birds are beaked trimmed at day old or soon after.

The Australian Egg Corporation is currently trying to implement a new standard for a version of free range production that will allow a stocking density of up to 20,000 birds per hectare and will allow beak trimming as a matter of course.

Industry practice has shown that beak trimming is totally unnecessary for hens on a free range farm – unless the farm is over stocked.

Phil Westwood
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