

Egg Carton Claims Not All They're Cracked up to Be

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Are the supposed "humanely-raised" eggs you buy from the grocery store really "natural" and "free-range"? What about the all-too-common claim made that eggs come from "cage-free" chickens? And what do all these terms actually mean in practical, legal terms? In a new study, Sheila Rodriguez from the Rutgers University School of Law asserts that many of these claims are both unsubstantiated and deceptive, and that consumers need to be aware of the dirty truth behind the eggs they buy.

"Most hens are packed eight or nine hens to a cage ... [and the cages are] so small that [hens] are unable to stretch a wing," she says in the report, which has been published in the *Temple Journal of Science, Technology & Environmental Law*. "The overcrowding causes them to fight, so their beaks are cut off to prevent them from injuring other birds. The fewer than 5 percent of eggs in the US that are not produced under these conditions are from hens that were not even allowed outside."

Many of the eggs produced in these horrific conditions, of course, are later sold in cartons blanketed with nice-sounding animal welfare language, which gives consumers the false impression that such eggs are superior to conventional eggs. Even "cage-free" eggs can come from birds that have lived in factory-farm hatcheries, and that continue to be confined in indoor pens where they never see the natural light of day -- and this all occurs because of the dubious laws that govern the issue, as well as lax enforcement of existing laws.

"Many of the production method claims made by egg producers cannot be accurately verified," adds Rodriguez. "Industry standards are factory farmed standards. Federally-verified claims made under the National Organic Program, though comprehensive, are problematic because of lax enforcement."

And yet many producers continue to make glowing claims on their cartons, which in turn allows them to charge consumers more for them. Even organic eggs, which typically bear the highest price tags, often come from hens that, while fed organic feed, still live in confinement or get little-to-no outdoor access.

True pasture-raised, free-range hens on the other hand produce eggs with solid shells, deep-yellow yolks, and superior overall taste. Many backyard and small-scale family farms produce and sell genuine pastured eggs from hens that are allowed to roam and peck freely, and anyone who has tried or that regularly eats eggs from such hens will be able to discern an obvious difference.

http://www.eurekalert.org/pub_releases/2011-05/ru-ecn053111.php