

Demand for Cage-Free Eggs Growing

Buyers' desire for cage-free eggs could provide a money-making opportunity for hobby farmers.

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Hobby farmers get your chickens ready! Cage-free eggs could be the next "must-have" product.

The New York Times reports that numerous restaurants and cafeterias at universities, hospitals and some company cafeterias have pledged to use only cage-free eggs on their menus. For example, in September 2006, Ben and Jerry's, the Vermont ice-cream maker, announced it would use only cage-free eggs certified humane. It's in the process of making the switch.

What these organizations are finding is that it's not always easy to find large quantities of cage-free eggs to purchase. But growing concern from consumers and animal rights activists about the conditions in which chickens and other animals are raised, is driving a gradual increase in cage-free operations.

According to the United Egg Producers, the number of laying hens not confined to small cages has increased from 2 percent to 5 percent over just a few years. There are a total of around 280 million laying hens in the United States.

Converting to a cage-free operation take drive, commitment and patience. It can take up to six months, including raising the chicks. The cost is about \$30 a bird versus about \$8 a bird for conventional.

The payoff comes at the market: The eggs can cost an extra 60 cents a dozen on the wholesale market.

What is "Cage-Free"

Eggs labeled "organic" and "free range" come from chickens with access to the outdoors. But the term "cage-free" is not tightly regulated.

The Food Safety Inspection Service of the Agriculture Department provides approval for companies to use the term cage-free on their labels, but reportedly not all laying operations are inspected.

And some say that cage-free settings will not always guarantee that chickens live a better life than those in a cage system.

Still, focusing on cage-free moves the industry close to cruelty free, according to the Humane Society.

And consumers are asking for more!