EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Study for the PETI committee

European Parliament

End the cage age: Looking for alternatives [1]

Background

This study was requested by the European Parliament's Committee on Petitions (PETI) in response to the European Citizens Initiative (ECI) 'End the Cage Age'. The petition 'End the Cage Age' (www.endthecageage.eu) was initiated in 2018 by Compassion in World Farming and over 170 other European animal welfare/protection organisations and citizens. Over the course of one year, 1.4 million verified signatures were collected from citizens in 28 EU Member States and handed in on 2 October 2020. Over the years, the Committee on Petitions has received a considerable number of petitions on animal welfare.

This study describes best practices for non-cage systems and the effects of the various housing systems on animal welfare, on the actors involved and on aspects of sustainability. The focus of the study is on alternatives to cage housing in laying hens and in sows, because of these species the largest numbers of animals are kept in cage housing in the EU. Non-cage alternatives for these species are already available and being used. Research on most of these non-cage alternatives is also available, allowing for a proper description of such non-cage systems. For other farm animals kept in cage systems an overview is provided of possible alternatives to cage housing or improvement of the current systems.

Main findings of the study

For laying hens, both furnished cage systems and non-cage systems are used in the EU. Non-cage systems provide laying hens with more behavioural freedom and access to floor substrate, which allows them to show behaviours such as foraging and dust bathing. Laying hens are strongly motivated to perform these behaviours. In cage systems, it remains very difficult to provide hens with proper access to litter.

On the other hand, the large flock size in non-cage housing systems places specific demands on the management by the farmer. Close attention is needed to prevent welfare problems such as feather pecking and cannibalism, keel bone damage, and crowding. Therefore, proper training of farm staff is important to successfully manage non-cage flocks. A transition to non-cage housing in laying hens is possible if the farmer is able to recover the increased costs of production. From sustainability analyses published to date it appears that non-cage systems for laying hens are economically, environmentally and socially similar to furnished cage systems.

As regards sows, the focus is on the individual housing of sows around insemination and during nursing, in the farrowing crate. In the period around insemination it is important to keep sows individually in order to monitor which sows are in oestrus and also to prevent unrest and subsequent trauma. However, it seems feasible to

[1] Full study in English:
http://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/STUD/2020/658539/IPOL_STU(2020)658539_EN.pdf

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significantly shorten the time period before the sows return to group housing - from 28 to 4 or 5 days. For the farrowing barn different systems exist, which vary from conventional crates to systems where the sow is only temporarily confined, to free-farrowing systems. For the farrowing phase it is important to select a system that safeguards both the welfare of the sow and that of the piglets. Temporary confinement of the sow around farrowing helps prevent crushing and savaging of new-born piglets.

Notably, multiple systems exist that allow for releasing the sow after a few days and allowing her to interact with the piglets. Also, multi-suckling systems exist where multiple sows and their piglets are housed together, with beneficial effects on the resilience of the piglets. As in the case of laying hens, to be able to transition to non-cage housing for sows, farmers need assurances that they will be able to recover the increased housing costs. In sustainability analyses published to date, no large differences were found between cage and non-cage pig production systems, but more research may be needed here. As regards production costs, systems where sows can be released after farrowing are more affordable than multi-suckling systems.

For the other species briefly described in this study (rabbits, ducks and geese, quail, fur animals and calves) limited alternatives to cage or individual housing were identified. For these species the most promising way towards improving welfare may be to improve the current cage housing systems (different flooring, platforms, shelters, environmental enrichment, avoiding overcrowding, social interaction between pens).

Recommendations

In order to facilitate a transition towards cage-free housing systems for farm animals in the EU, several measures could be taken at different levels and within different time frames. For short-term change, policy and financial measures (e.g. subsidies) may be the most promising. However, these types of measures are relatively voluntary and may be implemented differently by Member States, producers, and other actors involved. Adoption of legislation at EU level seems the most promising route to achieve a 100% shift towards cage-free housing systems. However, formulating and implementing legislation may take a long time and therefore seems especially promising for the longer-term change.

For laying hens, a transition away from cage housing could be facilitated by a ban on furnished cages, like the ban on conventional cages that came into force in 2012. For pigs, the time that the sows are housed individually could be shortened. Furthermore, a transition away from farrowing crates could be initiated so that sows are only confined temporarily around farrowing, or where loose farrowing is practiced. For species other than pigs and laying hens a legal ban on non-cage housing seems unrealistic at the moment.

A good way to help farmers who want to make a shift towards cage-free housing systems and to facilitate innovators and early adapters, could be to provide them with more financial security by granting subsidies and/or conditional loans. Retailers can also play an important role in the transition towards non-cage systems, for instance by only selling products from non-cage housed animals. Consequently, clear and reliable labelling of animal products regarding welfare aspects of their production is critical. Future legislation and a shift in housing systems should ideally be based on sound scientific findings.

In this study an overview is provided of scientific studies on the welfare consequences of different housing systems for laying hens and pigs. Despite the many useful studies that have been made, more knowledge of alternative and out-of-the-box housing systems is still needed. Research should not focus on one particular part of sustainability, but should look from a much broader perspective and choose a system approach.

A shift towards new housing systems is not always easy for livestock farmers who only have experience with the system they have always worked in. If bans on certain housing systems (such as furnished cages for laying hens) are considered, training and guidance is needed for farmers from countries where the majority of certain animals are kept in cages or where large parts of the farming practice involve cage housing.

For a successful shift to non-cage housing systems - either via legislation or subsidies and policies - cooperation between all actors is very important. Since most farmers do not produce, process and sell products themselves, it is important to engage all parties involved at an early stage of the transition process. This may be easier in

countries where agricultural products are produced in a more integrated way, but also in those countries communication with other stakeholders is needed. It is recommended to facilitate dialogue between the different actors and let them think about new future husbandry systems collectively.

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