

🕒 This article was published more than **7 years ago**

Democracy Dies in Darkness

ANIMALS

How eggs became a victory for the animal welfare movement



By [Karin Brulliard](#)

August 6, 2016 at 5:53 p.m. EDT

Fifteen years ago, few Americans other than farmers seemed to be thinking much about hens. Backyard chicken coops weren't really a thing. No major animal rights group spent time or money on farm animal welfare. "Factory farming" wasn't yet a catchphrase.

No longer. In recent years, there has been a veritable revolution in public attention to eggs and the chickens that produce them. In the past two years, nearly 200 U.S. companies – including every major grocery and fast-food chain – that together buy half of the 7 billion eggs laid monthly have pledged to use only cage-free eggs by 2025.

Grudgingly, the industry group that represents 95 percent of domestic egg producers says a cage-free future is a fait accompli.

The fast shift toward uncaged hens is a sign of Americans' increasing concern about animals, even ones known more for clucking than cuteness. But it also amounts to one of the animal advocacy movement's biggest victories in decades – one brought about by ballot measures, campaigns against companies, foodie culture and, above all, the power of the Internet.

"Whereas once this was an issue that was relegated to the margins, it's now firmly cemented in the mainstream," said Paul Shapiro of the Humane Society of the United States' farm animal protection division, whose undercover egg-farm investigation videos can score a half-million views online in one day. "The future looks a lot brighter for chickens today than it did a decade ago, to put it mildly."

That assessment reflects the decided pragmatism many prominent groups have adopted. The Earth Liberation Front once set slaughterhouses and fur farms ablaze, but today's most influential activists negotiate with corporations and egg producers – not to liberate chickens but to get them roomier living conditions. One major player is a small, millennial-led group that boasts of creating databases on egg-buying companies, lobbying investors and methodically testing the palatability of its public messaging.

“We’re very much obsessed with metrics,” said Aaron Ross, director of campaigns for the Humane League.

Figures are what he and other advocates use to justify their focus on the plight of egg-laying hens: Nearly all captive animals in the United States are used for food. Nine out of 10 land animals raised to be eaten are chickens. Currently, about 90 percent of egg-laying hens are packed together in stacks of wire cages so small that they cannot spread their wings. Eliminating those cages would improve the lives of 280 million animals – while not costing consumers all that much more, proponents say.

Some activists and small farmers fault the cage-free champions, arguing that anything less than an end to factory farming sells out hens. Although cage-free chickens can spread their wings and perch and forage, they say that the birds still spend their lives inside crowded barns.

The cage-free argument has also been undermined by a 2015 food industry-backed study concluding that cageless aviaries, which give hens more freedom to peck each other, have higher mortality and lower air quality than colony cages. The latter give chickens more space but do not comply with corporate cage-free policies.

“We know [cage-free] is not better for hens,” said Chad Gregory, president of United Egg Producers, which represents most American egg farmers. And activists, many of whom espouse veganism, “want to take away consumer choices,” Gregory said. “Ultimately, they’re not going to eat our product anyway.”

Animal advocates reject the findings of that study, arguing that the cage-free barns it examined were run by farmers without experience using such systems. They cite other research carried out in Europe, where the systems are far more common, that found lower mortality rates and higher overall hen welfare. But they acknowledge that uncaged hens hardly lead bucolic lives.

“It’s a substantial incremental improvement,” Shapiro said. “That’s the nature of social progress. Social progress generally occurs incrementally.”

Whatever the case for hen health and happiness, the cage-free corporate decisions represent a remarkable pivot in an era when 95 percent of animal welfare dollars go to cats and dogs, Humane Society chief executive Wayne Pacelle said.

When Pacelle took over the organization in 2004, he announced it would increase its attention to farm animals. He recruited from the small, chicken-focused group Shapiro had started in high school, Compassion Over Killing. Shapiro now manages a staff of 30.

The watershed moment came in 2008, activists say, when Californians overwhelmingly approved a ballot measure mandating that farm animals be able to turn around, stand up, lie down and extend their limbs. Although United Egg Producers spent \$10 million trying to defeat Proposition 2, the egg industry is not fighting an upcoming Massachusetts measure that would prohibit sales of meat or eggs from caged animals raised anywhere in the United States.

The recent momentum has grown out of campaigns that caused nearly all major food services, grocery and restaurant companies to pledge to use only cage-free eggs. Activists view Sodexo's February 2015 decision to do so in the United States as the catalyst. The coup de grace came six months later with a pledge from McDonald's, America's largest egg buyer.

Egg-industry analysts say the companies are reacting to consumer demand, yet it might be more accurate to say their actions reflect where the demand is heading. Cage-free eggs, which cost about three times more than conventional eggs, currently make up less than 10 percent of the market. But industry magazines are full of articles about converting to cageless systems – a switch so complicated and expensive that egg farmers say it will take years to complete. It requires retrofitting barns or acquiring permits to build new ones and ordering specialized equipment from the few companies that make it, Gregory said.

“Are we realists and understand what's realistically coming? Yes,” he said, although he warned that the industry won't be ready by 2025, when most companies have promised to source cage-free eggs. “We'll do what our customers want us to do.”

While the recent industry-backed study said production costs are 36 percent higher, animal rights activists argue that economies of scale will eventually push down the cost of cage-free eggs and point to studies that have found they cost only 12 cents to 15 cents a dozen more to produce. The companies seem to have concluded that customer interest in animal welfare is broad and likely to be sustained.

“Well-educated, affluent Americans, that's where we're seeing these attitudinal changes most directly,” said Janet Davis, a University of Texas historian and author of “The Gospel of Kindness: Animal Welfare and the Making of Modern America.” But when mass-market companies such as Walmart swear off caged eggs, “it does indicate a wholesale shift,” she said.

Much of the impetus of late has been spurred by the Humane League, which has focused almost exclusively on pushing companies to adopt cage-free eggs.

The group began a decade ago, pressuring college dining halls to switch their eggs, getting student governments to pass resolutions and student newspapers to write editorials, knocking on dorm rooms for petition signatures and asking graduates to withhold donations. It has since taken those tactics to corporations, targeting them with protests, shaming websites and systematic outreach to clients and investors.

“They've been strategic in going one company at a time and making clear that they will campaign until that company treats animals more humanely,” said Lewis Bollard, farm animal welfare program manager at the Open Philanthropy Project, which gives money to causes it deems effective and underfunded. This spring it awarded the Humane League a \$1 million grant.

The organization has 42 employees, most of whom work remotely. Its executive director, David Coman-Hidy, is a 27-year-old who carries a backpack. He wrote his college senior thesis on banning cages in Massachusetts by restructuring the state agricultural board.

Several months ago, his group met with Sodexo officials in Paris to try to talk them into going cage-free globally. The company announced in July that it will do so, a decision that will affect its purchases for food used at 32,000 schools, hospitals, corporations and other sites in 80 countries.

“There’s still work to be done, but the writing is on the wall, and this is the first time we’ve seen that as a movement,” Coman-Hidy said.

In addition to its grant to the Humane League, the Open Philanthropy Project gave \$1 million to Mercy for Animals and \$500,000 to the Humane Society to fund cage-free advocacy. Not long after, Bollard wrote a follow-up report on that funding, and he expressed one misgiving.

Because of the “speed of this progress,” Bollard wrote, the grants might have been “superfluous.”

Read more:

[This sea lion grooves to Earth, Wind & Fire — and science shows she’s got rhythm](#)

[Feds to Alaska: Stop killing bears and wolves on our land](#)

[Watch an eagle snatch an osprey from a nest like it’s no big deal](#)

[New Zealand vows to kill every rat, weasel and feral cat on its soil](#)