

OP-ED CONTRIBUTOR

Free the Hens, Costco!

By Bill Maher

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I LIKE Costco. We backed the same presidential candidate in the past few elections, and I like its generous wages and willingness to give its employees health care. And of course I agree with it on gay rights.

I've also been impressed by Costco's support for animal protection. For example, the company mandated that its suppliers stop locking pregnant pigs in cages called gestation crates by 2022. So I don't understand how Costco can justify its refusal to set a timeline for getting rid of eggs from battery cages, which is the third system, along with pork and veal, in the factory farming cruelty trifecta.

According to the industry itself, each hen in a battery cage is given less than 9 inches by 9 inches in which to live her entire life, crammed into a cage about the size of a file drawer with four or more other hens. (Costco sells some eggs that are organic and cage-free, but the vast majority are not.)

Make no mistake about it: Battery cages torment animals. Physically, the animals' muscles and bones waste away from lack of use, just as yours would if you were unable to move around for two years.

That's why multiple investigations into battery cages document animals with deteriorated spinal cords, some who have become paralyzed and then mummified in their cages. It's so common that the industry has a name for it: cage layer fatigue. It doesn't happen to animals that are allowed to move.

Even after an undercover video recently documented a Costco egg supplier locking birds in cages with the mummified corpses of their dead cage mates, Costco responded that the supplier was “behaving appropriately.”

Mentally, the birds, which can perform comparably to dogs on scientific animal behavior tests, go insane in these tiny cages. Imagine cramming five cats or dogs into tiny cages, hundreds of thousands in each shed, for their entire lives. That would warrant cruelty charges, of course. But when the egg industry does it to hens, it’s considered business as usual.

That’s why, in a ballot measure, the people of California banned the cages in 2008, reportedly by a margin greater than in any previous initiative.

Many consumers just don’t want them. In 2007, Costco said that it didn’t want them either; it promised to stop selling eggs from hens that are confined in cages, but almost 10 years later, the company has yet to release a timeline.

So Costco, which has generally been in front of the curve of social values, is now lagging. Unilever, which produces Hellmann’s mayonnaise, will be 100 percent cage-free by 2020. So will some of the largest food-service companies — including Aramark, Sodexo and Compass Group. Burger King will be 100 percent cage-free by 2017, and Whole Foods hasn’t sold caged eggs in more than a decade.

At Costco though, there’s no end in sight for this hideously outdated and cruel practice. A company that takes pride in its other socially conscious positions can do better than this.

Costco, please, free the hens already.

Bill Maher is the host of HBO’s “Real Time With Bill Maher.”

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