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Jill Benson surveys an egg processing plant that holds thousands of hens in small pens in Atwater, Calif. Producers say a 2008 law requiring more space is vague and will be costly.

California law that lets chickens extend wings causes a flap with egg producers

By Tracie Cone
ASSOCIATED PRESS

FRESNO, Calif. — By one of the biggest margins in California’s rich initiative history, voters decreed last year that egg-laying hens must be able to stretch their wings without touching another bird or a cage wall.

But the details of the new animal welfare law are bedeviling egg farmers.

Some are even rumored to be breeding hens with shorter wings, a tactic producers deny with a laugh.

And a newly introduced bill in Sacramento would require competing farmers in other states to adopt California’s standards if they want to sell eggs in the Golden State.

California’s egg producers say they don’t know how to comply with the vague language of the Prevention of Farm Animal Cruelty Act, short of allowing hens to range free.

“We aren’t about to invest millions without black-and-white standards that talk about stocking densities, height and width,” Modesto egg producer Jill Benson said.

Benson operates three barns, each the size of a football field, that house 500,000 hens in wire cages.

Industrywide, chickens are now provided an average space the size of an 8½-by-11 sheet of paper.

The new regulations approved in November don’t take effect until 2015, but the egg fight has already come to roost in the state Capitol, where lawmakers are being lobbied by producers to clarify the requirements and address the added cost to meet them.

“You still have an industry in denial,” said state Sen. Dean Florez, a Democrat and chair-

man of the Food and Agriculture Committee.

Though last year’s ballot measure didn’t specifically call for cage-free hen houses, the Humane Society of the United States admittedly wrote it so no currently available cage systems could meet the requirements.

“Cage-free was what we were talking about,” said Jennifer Fearing, who guided the Proposition 2 campaign for the organization.

In a 63.5 percent landslide last November, 8 million voters decided that California’s 19.4 million confined, egg-laying hens must have room to stand up, turn around and extend their wings.

California egg ranchers contend the requirements will add a penny to the cost of every egg and could put them out of business as they try to compete with operations in other states that don’t face the same rules.

California ranchers are seeking ways to keep their hens in cages and still comply with the law. They say caging systems make it easier and more cost-effective to feed hens, keep them clean and collect their eggs.

“The question is how much space” chickens must have, Debbie Murdock, executive director of the United Egg Producers, said on the group’s Web site.

Meanwhile, restaurant chains such as Burger King and Wendy’s have started using more cage-free eggs at the urging of the society.

Humane Society officials say cage-free hens could help California farmers dominate the fast-growing specialty egg market, which accounts for about 5 percent of nationwide sales.

“California egg producers will never win the race to the cheapest egg, because Iowans live closer to the grain,” Fearing said. “But they can win the race to the most highly valued egg.”

TRACT: Financial questions have yet to be answered

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concluded in 2007 that the youth association should be retained. The youth complex is a mainstay for the children of many affluent families in West Austin. Some members of the blue-ribbon panel reside in the neighborhood and have close ties to the association, including the chairman, lawyer Larry Temple, whose son is a former president of the association.

Also yet to be resolved is the financing for a major redevelopment of the Brackenridge tract, portions of which are already leased for a grocery store, restaurants, a marina, shops, an upscale apartment complex and the LCRA’s headquarters, in addition to the golf course. Those leases do not expire for many years.

Cooper, Robertson’s economic analysis won’t be finished for two months or so. It’s unclear whether the university, the city, the state or developers — or some combination of those parties — would pay for roads, utilities and other infrastructure.

“I really wouldn’t even know how to answer that right now,” Huffines said. “It’s so premature until we decide what we want to do.”
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