



Position statement of the International Veterinary Students' Association on the European Citizens' Initiative "End the Cage Age"

Summary:

"End the Cage Age" is a European Citizens' Initiative (ECI) with a total of 1.397.113 validated signatures across Europe. This gives End the Cage Age the third highest ECI signature count on record and makes it the first successful animal welfare related ECI ever to be submitted. The initiative was submitted to the European Commission on October 2nd, 2020 and was initiated by Compassion in World Farming (CIWF). The End the Cage Age ECI currently has the support of 170 different organisations from across the European animal welfare space.

IVSA's Standing Committee on Animal Welfare hereby urges the European Commission to update regulations regarding animal welfare, to amend practices considered cruel and unnecessary by veterinary students and veterinarians within our network.

Introduction:

We, the International Veterinary Students Association, represent nearly 40.000 members from over 70 countries. Our Association also represents working veterinarians, via our Working Group on Alumni. Our professional responsibilities include acting as advocates for animal rights and to ensure the adherence to existing animal welfare laws across our respective countries. Creating a positive change in animal welfare requires collaboration with organisations dedicated to monitoring real world welfare issues, which animals face everyday. The aim of this position statement is to outline IVSA's vested interest in a cage-free future and support of this ECI.

Background:

Animal farms make up an important sector of the overall agricultural industry. In 2016, 55% of all agricultural holdings in the EU were involved in the production of livestock [1]. Within these holdings there are over 300 million animals, who spend most or all of their lives in cages. These species include pigs, laying hens, rabbits, duck, geese, quail, and calves [2].

It is widely acknowledged within the veterinary scientific community that conventional cages, described in the study requested by the PETI committee [2], are responsible for a large variety of welfare problems [3,4,5]. Many of the animal welfare concerns created or exacerbated by the use of cages in animal farming violate the global animal welfare standards outlined by the Farm Animal Welfare Council's (FAWC) Five Freedoms below [6]:

- Freedom from hunger and thirst
- Freedom from discomfort
- Freedom from pain, injury, and disease
- Freedom to express normal behavior
- Freedom from fear and distress

The issues extend beyond violations of the FAWC's Five Freedoms. The conditions in cages used in many animal farms violate the very limited freedoms outlined in the original Five Freedoms included in the Brambell Report of 1965 [7]. These freedoms include the ability to stand up, lie down, turn around, perform natural grooming behaviours, and to be provided with enough space to stretch limbs. Current cage-based animal production systems represent the direct cause of many severe health and welfare concerns for farmed animals. For sows, the use of farrowing crates increases the incidence of pressure sores (decubitus ulcers) since they spend a long period of time lying down [8]. It also prevents adequate nest building behaviors which leads to frustration and stress [9]. Other than that,





studies also show that sows in farrowing crates bite the bars [10], have higher stress hormone levels (11), longer farrowing durations and higher stillbirth rates [12].

For hens, a study observed virtually no wing flapping at all in small furnished cages [13]. Normal dust-bathing behaviour in cages is also highly restricted. Due to the lack of space, dust-bathing birds are commonly interrupted, jostled or pecked by their companions [14].

Call to action:

The International Veterinary Students' Association calls on the EU to revise EU Directive 98/58/EC on the protection of animals kept for farming purposes, which already states that "the freedom of movement of an animal ... must not be restricted to cause unnecessary suffering". This requires a transition from cage-based farming systems to alternative cage-free systems such as free range farms. These systems grant animals greater personal autonomy and provide the physical space necessary to facilitate natural behaviours. [15, 16, 17, 18]

The following discussion outlines specific welfare issues in two farmed species. However, we support revisions and changes made to all animal farms discussed in the ECI (rabbits, ducks, quail, geese, calves, pullets, broiler breeds, and layer breeds) . The scope of this document does not allow us to discuss all species in detail, but we are happy to provide further information upon request.

Sows:

The animal welfare benefits of free farrowing systems include:

- **Animal Comfort:** Farrowing crates result in extreme confinement of animals over several weeks. During this time , the sows are forced to lay down on one side so they can nurse their piglets and there is not enough space for the sow to turn around or move (General size : 150 x 200 cm). This results in abnormal behaviours such as bar biting, excessive drinking and apathy [19].
- **Natural Behaviors:** The use of restrictive farrowing crates prevents natural nesting behaviors that play an essential role in a sow's preparation for parturition (birth). Furthermore, sows confined in these crates have severely restricted access to their offspring and are unable to properly exhibit natural nurturing behaviours [20,21].
- **Reduced Mortality:** The most common argument in favour of farrowing crates is the decreased rates of mortality in neonatal piglets. Studies have shown that the mortality rates in free farrowing systems aren't increased [22, 23]. As mentioned above, restrictive animal production practices such as farrowing crates offer only a very limited solution without addressing the root cause of the behavioural issue at hand (in this case, the sow's inability to express maternal behaviors) [20].
- **Maintain Productivity;** IVSA believes animal welfare conditions can be improved while maintaining productivity. Swine producers in the Netherlands and Sweden have successfully shortened the period of confinement in farrowing crates to four days postpartum, which is a significant improvement of the current industry standard of four weeks. These improvements are in line with scientific literature, which proves that the majority of piglet mortalities occur within the first three days postpartum. Additionally, the slight increase in mortalities that may be seen in the first three days postpartum in free farrowing systems is compensated by better piglet viability and improvements in health overall. There are no significant differences in the overall mortality rates between free farrowing and farrowing crate systems [2].

IVSA urges the EU to phase out the use of farrowing crates in the shortest possible time frame and to promote a transition to well researched free farrowing systems. [24].





Laying hens:

- **Natural Behaviors:** In natural conditions chickens spend between half and 90% of their time foraging, making up to 15,000 pecks a day [24]. The use of furnished cages significantly reduces hens' opportunities to perform these behaviors due to an inadequate supply of litter [2].
- **Dust bathing:** Dust bathing is an integral part of grooming behavior in hens and is a vital part of positive welfare, and subsequent productivity for hens. Dust bathing in current caged-based systems is virtually impossible as furnished cages do not provide hens with adequate space to carry out natural behaviours [26].
- **Stocking Density:** Laying hens forced to endure high density stocking conditions often display abnormal behaviors such as feather pecking. Studies have shown this to occur in 37.5% of the population [25]. Lower ranking individuals are unable to escape attacks from other hens when kept in close confinement. Stocking densities must be reduced to eliminate this and other welfare concerns.
- **Productivity:** Recent studies have shown that there is an insignificant difference in the mortality rate in caged and free farming systems [28,29]. There was a 3% increase in feed intake seen in birds housed in aviaries compared to cages. Furthermore, the overall feed conversion efficiency was increased by 6.7% in aviaries. [30]

IVSA calls on the EU to implement a rapid phasing out of furnished cages for laying hens and a swift transition to free farming systems as mentioned in the study requested by the PETI committee [2].

The discussion above represents an example of the shifts we would like to see in all the animal farming practices outlined within the ECI. We would like to stress that we wish to see changes made for all species within the ECI, and that we don't want to see any species dismissed or overlooked.

Conclusion:

Animal welfare is of growing concern to consumers across Europe. The current pandemic caused by the SARS-CoV-2 virus highlights the need for tangible solutions to animal management issues. Public awareness of the dangers of animal mismanagement continues to increase, therefore a rapid plan of action is essential. The EU should respect the voices of its citizens who support this ECI, and implement immediate improvements to the regulation of animal welfare within the sectors mentioned above.

IVSA's Standing Committee on Animal Welfare hereby calls on the EU to revise EU Directive 98/58/EC on the protection of animals kept for farming purposes to prohibit the use of cages in farming in the shortest possible time frame. These amendments should take into account the welfare requirements briefly outlined in this statement. We acknowledge complementary actions, on top of legislative changes, need to be taken in order to guarantee a smooth transition to cageless farming. Therefore, we strongly encourage that scientific guidance be sought from experts in animal welfare. A serious investment must be made by the EU to facilitate changes made at farm level to support farmers during the transitional period. The IVSA Standing Committee on Animal Welfare deems the swift transition to cage free farming for all the aforementioned species to be critically important for the advancement of animal welfare and improvement of animal farming practices in member states.





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