

“Perches for Laying Hens”

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Laying hens are strongly motivated to perch, and perching can improve leg bone strength. Growing numbers of guidelines and pieces of legislation are requiring that hens be provided with perches to improve welfare. In response, perches are now regularly incorporated into aviary and enriched cage housing systems. Perches are often provided according to hen body width (~15 cm) at a rate that allows most hens to perch simultaneously. (For example, many U.S. guidelines say that 55% of hens must be able to perch at once at 15 cm/hen, and 20% of perches must be elevated 0.4-1.0 m above the floor.)

Research has demonstrated that hens prefer to use perches more than 1 m above the ground, particularly at night. Observations of laying hens in commercial aviaries have substantiated this research, showing that hens crowd upper perches while perch space is still available on lower levels. Limited access to preferable high perches may cause frustration for hens that are unable to roost on those perches or aggression between hens as they compete for desirable space.

- 1) Do you think that U.S. perch guidelines will work as intended to improve the welfare of laying hens? Why or why not? (Assuming height is the only perch parameter we need to worry about.)
- 2) What ethical issues could arise when guidelines and laws require change, but the result may not improve welfare as intended?
- 3) Does it matter how many hens would have improved welfare if perches are provided as the guidelines describe? Does it matter whether some of the negative consequences cause more welfare problems for some hens than were caused when all hens did not have perches?
- 4) How would your assessment be influenced if you were:
 - a. A poultry producer?
 - b. An executive for a company purchasing eggs that will be labeled based on hens being able to perch?
 - c. A member of an organization concerned with the welfare of laying hens?
 - d. A customer buying eggs at the grocery store trying to decide whether to buy more expensive eggs labeled based on hens being able to perform perching behavior?
- 5) What ethical approach did you use in providing your answers above? (e.g., Rights-based, utilitarianism, ethics of care, etc)