

High Politics and Low Blows – A rebuttal Australian Egg Corp Propegganda

Lee McCosker gives a Humane Choice perspective of the Australian Egg Corp article entitled ‘High Politics and Low Blows’ by Kai Ianssen

AECL say:

History has shown us that civilisation is built on the intensification of food production.

The progression to intensive food production in rural areas over thousands of years has meant that people can live in large numbers in cities and devote their time to pursuits other than food production.

Without intensive food production, there would be very few professions in the world other than farming to grow food for individual families to survive.

Without intensive food production, the great cultures throughout history would never have existed.

.....

And without intensive food production in the modern world, people living in the cities would have little or no time for hobbies, studies, playing sport, or spending time with family and friends.

We all know this. But there is a frightening, growing alliance of media and green groups who are trying to destroy the foundations of what we know as civilisation in an increasingly vicious battle. It is sad to have to refer to the conflict between green groups/media and the livestock industries as a battle.

Humane Choice response:

The history of agriculture dates back thousands of years and has been defined by different cultures and climates and in more recent times, technology. Modern society and agriculture have grown together and brought about community, human values and a respect for natural resources.

Over the past century large scale agriculture has spread rapidly throughout the developed world with the introduction of machine driven farming equipment and the development of synthetic fertilizers, pesticides and herbicides. These large scale farms are based on monocultures and now dominate the modern farming system. Organised society has come a long way from our original hunter gatherer lifestyle.

Yet 70% of the world’s population is still fed by peasants.¹ We were all called peasants once but some may now more readily recognize themselves as smallholders.

¹ ETC Group – Who Will Feed Us?

Agriculture, distinct from today's intensive agriculture, has definitely played a key role in the development of human civilization. However, concerns have been raised over the sustainability of landless or feedlot systems and monocultures typical of intensive farming practices. Intensive farming systems are now often independent of local and natural resources, the very foundation on which modern agriculture was founded. Where have our historic human values gone? Has intensive agriculture gone too far? These concerns have driven the demand for food produced under organic or free range systems. There is a 'back to basics' movement growing in our rural communities and in the minds of concerned consumers.

AECL say:

But unfortunately they have raised the tempo and hysteria on these issues to new heights... and it is increasing. We are in a dangerous era for food producers. Dangerous because one of the most important issues of the day for many green groups/media today is not 'feeding the world' as most rational people would think.

Instead, these people are more concerned about 'how we feed the world'. This is frightening because it elevates animal rights above human rights.

Humane Choice response:

Making a conscious choice to purchase food for the family table that has been grown under more natural, welfare friendly and sustainable methods is not done in a bid to bring an end to industrialized agriculture. It is a personal choice and one that we all have the right to make. It is not a conflict between 'green', 'media' or 'welfare' groups and mainstream agriculture yet peak industry groups such as Australian Egg Corporation (AECL) are intent on shouting down those that have not heeded their industry contrived propaganda. The claim by AECL that we will be "destroying what we know as civilization"² should we spurn intensive animal production is simply outrageous, unfounded and an offense to the thinking consumer. It signifies a desperate bid by industrialized producers to hang on to their market share at any cost.

AECL say:

The Context

One of the most important aspects of a battle is to understand the context in which it is being fought. The Four Corners story on Indonesian abattoirs earlier this year was a turning point in livestock industry media relations in 2011. I was in Parliament House in Canberra at the time of the story. At 8.25pm that evening, politicians were literally sprinting down the corridors of Parliament House to watch this story.

That story turned a skirmish into a war on many fronts. So much so, that there are now big things afoot behind the scenes in the livestock industries. So watch this space.

Dropping down a layer from Federal Politics, I would like to describe some of the "High Politics and Low Blows in NSW" during the past six months.

² High Politics and Low Blows in NSW – Australian Egg Corporation Newsletter

Humane Choice response:

The Context

The argument about feeding the world and that a plethora of radical groups are trying to put an end to intensive farming is all just smoke and mirrors.

What we are talking about here is the use of the term free range. Labelling of Free Range eggs has nothing at all to do with feeding the world but has everything to do with lining the pockets of the major players in the egg industry.

Whether we like it or not, whether we agree or disagree, there will always be a place for intensive agriculture in food production. The real issue here is that the Australian Egg Corporation wants to sell us production line eggs as free range. AECL want to enable some of its members to continue to label eggs as free range when the actual production systems employed to produce them don't meet consumer expectations of what free range is or meet the guidelines of the Code of Practice for the Welfare of Animals.

Simply, to put this into context, AECL want the consumer to believe that if there are restrictions on who can label their eggs as free range it will mean that we will no longer be able to feed the world enough eggs. In reality, we will still produce the same number of eggs, they will just have to be labelled correctly.

AECL say:

Truth in Labelling

It all started with the NSW Greens Truth in Labelling Bill, compiled in 2010. The Bill in its original form had several areas of concern. One was that all egg production systems that did not comply with the Greens view of the world (stocking densities of no more than 750 ha and no beak trimming) had to be referred to as cage eggs.

The other was that the Bill did not allow for positive claims to be made on a caged egg label. For example, that means a farmer who off-set carbon emissions from their caged egg production by planting trees would have been restricted from telling consumers that on labels.

In its initial state, the Bill would have allowed a portion of the free range industry to thrive, while banning the majority. AECL supports all compliant egg farmers – so this development was very concerning.

As a result, the Egg industry together with the NSW Farmers' Association Egg Committee, spent considerable time meeting NSW MP's to express concerns about the Bill. The Bill was delayed several times before it was considered by the NSW Upper House.

Humane Choice response:

Truth In Labelling

In 2010, the NSW Greens instigated the Truth In Labelling Bill. This was a brave initiative brought about by John Kaye after consultation with genuine free range producers and many 'minority' members of the Australian egg industry. The mum and dad type producers, the

smallholders, large free range farms and the industry associations supporting and promoting them.

The original Bill included stocking densities of 750 birds per hectare for free range hens along with other conditions that would have been in the best interest of the birds, and the consumer. In effect, the Greens had promoted an ideal for egg production but had left room for discussion, debate and compromise.

AECL say:

Low Blows

But during that delay, AECL's draft Egg Standards Australia was released to egg producers, providing the Greens with a perfect storm in which to mount a misleading and manipulative political and media campaign.

Somehow or other, the draft ESA ended up in the lap of a Fairfax journalist who decided to run a story, without publishing the defensive information AECL had provided. The story merged the draft ESA with the Greens Bill and it created media frenzy.

Unfortunately the rest of the media decided to follow this paradigm, without appreciating that it excluded AECCL's defensive comments.

Humane Choice response:

Low Blows

While the Bill was being discussed in Parliament and in the media, AECL made its move to secure the free range industry for its large, industrialized producers. AECL has attempted to raise the stocking densities for free range layer hens to 20,000 birds per hectare. They have chosen to ignore the Code of Practice and their own certification guidelines for Egg Corp Assured in doing so. AECL tried to rewrite the National Code of Practice for the Welfare of Animals – Poultry with their erroneous interpretation of the requirements for stocking densities for layer hens within this code. Amid confusion over the development of an Australian Egg Standard, AECL slipped in discussion about their own Egg Standard Australia and attempted to have it endorsed without full industry consultation.

AECL says:

Market Research

We built our arsenal – by commissioning a market research company called Brand Story to conduct qualitative research into the attitudes of free range egg buyers in Sydney and Melbourne regarding stocking densities of 2 birds per square metre. The research, comprising of six focus groups, was conducted just after the Fairfax story was published and reprinted across the country. The results of this qualitative study showed that the vast majority had not noticed any recent media coverage on the issue.

Humane Choice response:

Market Research

AECL base their proposed increased stocking density of 20,000 birds per hectare on consumer research yet this research has not been made available to the public or to egg producers.

AECL say:

Beak Treatment

We built our arsenal – by compiling a new fact sheet about beak treatment, as well as shooting video footage about the treatment at Hy-Line. We did this because Greens groups continue to spout the myth that debeaking and beak trimming are the main forms of beak modification.

As you are all aware, infrared beak treatment (IRBT) has replaced beak trimming since the late 1990s in Australia as the main method of reducing the risk of feather pecking or cannibalism among laying hens in cage, barn and free range flocks.

Humane Choice response:

Beak Treatment

More smoke and mirrors. No matter what system is employed to cut the beaks of day old chicks the fact is that these birds are being subjected to this practice in breach of the Code of Practice. The Code only allows beak trimming as a last resort. The code first requires that environmental factors be examined and that remedies such as reducing stocking densities be attempted first. Only after all measures to control a feather pecking or cannibalism outbreak have failed should a producer then consult with an animal welfare expert before beak trimming.

Chicks hatched for Australian egg farms are debeaked at one day of age.³ Clearly there is not enough time to follow the guidelines set out in the Code of Practice.

AECL say:

High Politics

The vote came ... and in the act of high politics, the Shooters and Fishers sided with the ALP. It appeared that the ALP had played some high politics to get the shooters onside.

The Greens did not oppose the Labor Party amendment – and in that act, they endorse the Model Code of Practice that does not have a cap on stocking densities and that allows beak trimming to approve hen welfare.

But publicly, would the Greens admit to their hypocrisy. NO! They hailed their amended Bill as a success. ..But perhaps that success was in name only because it still has to go before the lower house that is controlled by the Government.

Humane Choice response:

High Politics

The vote came and the Shooters and Fishers joined the ALP in support of the Green's Truth in Labelling Bill.

The ALP had made amendments to the Bill which the Greens did not oppose. The Bill now reiterates the Code of Practice for the Welfare of Animals – Poultry which caps the stocking density for free range hens at 1,500 birds per hectare.

The Code of Practice has simply been ignored for way too long. In its current state it is only a set of guidelines. Guidelines that have been manipulated or ignored on the whim of industry. The Australian Egg Industry has unfortunately proven that it is incapable of self regulation. Legislating the Code of Practice is the best outcome for the entire industry and a very fair way of addressing current problems. After all, the code is the industry accepted way of doing business isn't it?

AECL says:

The challenge for us all is to strike the right balance. We need to manage consumer and MUCH more importantly, media expectations. We need to dissolve media hostility with our science, our hen welfare practises and the personal integrity of egg farmers. We need to spell out that increased production costs increase egg prices. We need to demonstrate that profitable farms only exist when farmers invest in hen welfare. And we need to tell them that Australian egg farmers care about providing affordable, welfare-friendly and nutritious eggs for Australians.

Humane Choice response:

Again we are at the mercy of AECL and their game of smoke and mirrors. There is so much more at play here. Talk about High Politics!

The key is a few simple words – *industry accepted practice*.

All Codes of Practice are eventually to be enshrined in law. It has already happened in the pork industry. The poultry code is not due for review for a couple years yet and what AECL plan to do in the mean time is have stocking densities of 20,000 birds per hectare seen as the standard or industry accepted practice by the time that review date rolls around. AECL had hoped to have their Egg Standards Australia in place that allowed for such stocking densities to be able to prove that 20,000 birds per hectare is indeed industry accepted practice and therefore should be included in the new legislation. In debate over the Truth in Labelling Bill, there will no doubt be a strong argument to wait until the review process happens around 2014 for this very reason.

The challenge for us now is to let our government know that we want our businesses and our rights as consumers protected.

We need to engage more with customers, the media and our local members of parliament. We need to dissolve the hysteria about feeding the world that Australian Egg Corporation is fostering and promote our true free range farming systems for the viable, sustainable systems that they are. Farms that promote community, old fashioned human values, a balance between natural, social and human resources and farming practices and respect for the land and livestock that produce our wholesome food. A way of farming that can be sustained for generations to come.

Author:

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Humane Choice