

FARMLIVING

AND THE WINNERS ARE...

Western Producer readers share more of their quick and favourite recipes in our Dinner Rush Contest. | **Page 76**



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A recent survey suggests consumers would pay more for meat, cheese and eggs that are certified as being produced from animals that are humanely raised. | FILE PHOTOS

ANIMAL WELFARE | CONSUMER SURVEY

Conventional or free range?

Animal welfare survey | British Columbia consumers were the most concerned about animal welfare

BY SHANNON MONEO
FREELANCE WRITER

VICTORIA —Canadians' views on the humane treatment of food-producing animals depend on where they live.

A recent Harris/Decima survey commissioned by the Vancouver Humane Society asked 1,000 people about animals raised for food, focusing on egg production.

Seventy-eight percent of British Columbia residents expressed concern about the humane treatment of farm animals raised for food, the highest in Canada, while only 65 percent felt the same in Manitoba and Saskatchewan, which was the lowest percentage.

The national average was 71 percent.

"B.C. remains the most compassionate province," said Leanne McConnachie, director of farm animal programs for the humane society.

Another notable gap was revealed when respondents were asked if they would pay more for meat, cheese and eggs that were certified to humane standards of care by a third party.

Eighty percent of B.C. respondents said they would pay more, tied with Atlantic Canada, while 64 percent of Manitoba and Saskatchewan residents were willing to pay more.

The national average was 72 percent.

McConnachie said the survey shows consumers are willing to pay more for food, with the profit going to farmers.

"The cheap food policy has not served us well," she said. "When

things are cheap, something suffers. In this case, it's the animals."

Al Sakalauskas, executive director of the B.C. Egg Marketing Board, doesn't think all consumers are willing to pay more for eggs certified as humanely raised.

He said it's similar to going green. Consumers only go so far when it comes to paying premium prices.

There are plenty of examples where what people say is not backed up with consumer behaviour, he added.

Further regional differences were underscored when respondents were asked if they oppose the use of battery cages for egg-laying hens.

B.C., at 64 percent of respondents, had the highest rate of opposition compared to the lowest objection rate of 49 percent in Manitoba and Saskatchewan. The national average was 57 percent.

McConnachie said the survey focused on eggs because they are relatively inexpensive and an item bought by most people, but it was the egg questions that revealed the most consumer confusion.

"Most people think they're buying free-run eggs when they're not," McConnachie said.

The disparity was most evident in B.C., where 33 percent of respondents said they buy free-run, free-range or organic eggs. However, McConnachie said only 12 to 15 percent of the eggs produced in B.C. meet those criteria.

The national average was 17 percent, and varied from a low of nine percent in Quebec, 12 percent in Atlantic Canada, 17 percent in Ontario and 18 percent on the Prairies.

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LEANNE MCCONNACHIE
VANCOUVER HUMANE SOCIETY

British Columbians' apparent appetite for cage-free eggs indicates to McConnachie that a lot more free-run, free-range and organic eggs can be sold.

Sakalauskas said egg producers are responding to the demand, with the specialty market expected to grow to 20 percent of all eggs produced in B.C. within three years.

He said it can't happen overnight because moving from cage systems to free-run or free-range is a long-term process.

According to the B.C. Egg Marketing Board, 88 percent of the 64 million eggs produced per year by 130 producers' 2.4 million hens are housed in cages. The remaining 12 percent are free-run, free-range and organic free-range.

Less than five percent of Canadian eggs come from cage-free farms, which means almost all of Canada's eggs come from hens raised in battery cages, according to the Vancouver Humane Society.

According to the Canadian Egg Marketing Agency, Canada has approximately 1,050 regulated egg operations. The typical operation has roughly 18,000 hens for a total

Canadian laying flock of almost 19 million.

Believing that most consumers would choose free-run, free-range or organic eggs over caged products, the Vancouver Humane Society is leading a project to eliminate battery cages, called ChickenOut.

Battery barns in Canada hold thousands of small cages, each holding five to seven birds, in tiers of two to eight cages high, with farms averaging 18,400 birds, according to a 2006 Agriculture Canada survey.

Sakalauskas said his industry takes a holistic approach.

Food safety, product quality and environmental impact have to be balanced with "whether an animal is exerting its natural behaviour by flapping its wings."

Seventy-two percent of British Columbia respondents said they

would support a legislative ban on battery cages, while the lowest response came from Alberta at 63 percent.

The national average was 68 percent.

Quebeckers showed the most support, 83 percent, when asked if cartons containing eggs from hens raised in battery cages should be labelled as "eggs from caged hens." The lowest support came from B.C. at 72 percent.

The national average was 78 percent.

The European Union is banning all battery cages next year, joining Switzerland, which was the first country to ban them in 1992, as well as Austria, Germany, Netherlands and Sweden.

California and Michigan have also voted to ban battery cages.

