April 2023

EPB and EFFAB statement to the European Citizens' Initiative (ECI) on "End the Cage Age"

Background

In June 2021, in response to the European Citizens' Initiative (ECI) on "End the Cage Age", the European Commission (EC) gave a clear commitment to issue legislative proposals to end the use of cages for farmed animals within the EU.

The citizens' initiative calls on the Commission to propose legislation prohibiting the use of:

- cages for laying hens, rabbits, pullets, broiler breeders, layer breeders, quail, ducks and geese;
- farrowing crates for sows;
- sow stalls, where not already prohibited; and
- individual calf pens, where not already prohibited.

In response to the initiative and to the demand for a transition to more ethical and sustainable farming systems, the Commission intends to **propose to phase out and finally prohibit the use of such cage systems, for all these species and categories, under conditions (including the length of the transition period) to be determined based on EFSA opinions and an impact assessment.** This will be included as one of the key objectives of the revision of animal welfare legislation that the Commission has committed to propose by the last quarter of 2023[1].

Achievements and Challenges

1. European primary poultry breeding companies already put a high emphasis **on welfare and sustainability;** this progress is disseminated globally to feed the world with high-quality animal protein. More than 50% of the global poultry supply comes from EU-origin breeding sites.

2. The European breeding companies are leaders in responsible and balanced breeding through huge investments in research and innovation in poultry genetics. Primary breeders have been committed to improve animal welfare, as well as animal health and sustainability for many years through the **CODE EFABAR for responsible and balanced breeding.**

3. Poultry breeding animals are housed separately at the Pure Line level to help capture reliable data, individually, which is essential to perform balanced breeding programs, to control mating and to maintain **genetic diversity**, especially in smaller populations.

[1] Communication from the Commission on the ECI 'End the Cage Age'

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4. Poultry breeders have been collaborating with scientists and equipment suppliers on **finding housing alternatives** for many years with significant improvements, but not as to entirely eliminate the use of individual bird housing, yet.

5. EFFAB and EPB believe that any European measures in relation to animal breeding must be based on sound **scientific evidence** and consider the diversity within the breeding sector, acknowledging the benefits as well as the risks as they pertain to specific species. Any measure must also be attainable, sustainable, and realistic as regards its implementation since the outcome will have long lasting impacts for European and global food production systems.

6. Our members reinforce that **all segments** of the poultry production, from conventional to organic, would be **impacted** by any European measure in relation to animal breeding such as a ban on the use of cages.

7. Banning cages at the breeding level without alternatives, will have a huge negative impact on **animal welfare for farm animals** in EU and globally. It will also impact all types of production systems and breeders within the EU.

Recommendations

As EU representatives of the breeding organisations for food-producing animals (poultry, including broiler breeders, layers, ducks, geese and quails), EFFAB and EPB have considered the options to address the initiative and would like to call on the Commission to take our recommendations into account.

8. EFFAB and EPB call on the Commission to acknowledge the purpose of the use of cages at the breeding level and recognize the progress and improvements made for finding alternatives. As stated by EFSA in its recent opinions on welfare of broilers and layers, *"Individual data acquisition is essential to improve genetic lines with the objective of a continuous improvement of health and performance."*

9. Our members call on the Commission to work in collaboration with the sector and allow for a **progressive approach to non-cage breeding systems; whereby commitment would be made to continuously show progress. Based on the progress achieved, realistic next steps to reach the end goal to fully suppress the use of separated houses can be set.** Poultry breeders are dedicated to work in the frame of a **continuous improvement plan**, whereby the European Commission would support the research for reliable alternatives and transition with adapted resources (financial and technological).

10. EFFAB and EPB invite the Commission to implement an active follow-up every 5 years in order to measure the progress and evaluate the alternatives.

11. EFFAB and EPB call on the Commission to allow for **sufficient time** and resources for research and progress towards a non-cage system for the breeding sector. Banning separate housing at the breeding level without sustainable solutions would significantly slow the genetic improvement in many important traits for **sustainability** and will impact the poultry sector

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(meat and eggs) negatively. It will also potentially lead to the **end of the whole production system for minor species** (e.g., quails) **or breeds where breeding is absolutely impossible at this date without separate pens** (small populations including backyard).

12. We call on the Commission to implement **identical measures for products imported** from third countries to ensure a level playing field and, protect and guarantee to our EU producers and farmers their license to produce. It is crucial that the EU stays competitive on the internal market to safeguard our food sovereignty.

13. EFFAB and EPB members would like to emphasize the utmost need to guarantee food security and sovereignty as a priority and to ensure that any new initiative does not put EU food producing systems at risk.

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