



**HUMANE SOCIETY
INTERNATIONAL**



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U.S. egg epidemic reinforces link between intensive farming and risks to human health

A multi-state recall for eggs across the U.S. has just been voluntarily announced by egg producing giant, Wright County Egg Farm. Their official media release stated that “There have been confirmed *Salmonella* enteritidis illnesses relating to the shell eggs and trace back investigations are ongoing”.

The company holds more than 7.5 million egg laying hens. The number of hens affected has not been officially reported. However, over 1000 cases of intestinal illness have been reported; the official egg recall extends over 19 brands; and the actual number of eggs being recalled is reported to be in the millions and increasing.

Salmonella enteritidis is a bacterium pathogenic to humans. Animal Health Australia notes that it is an egg-transmitted disease of poultry that also has human health implications through the consumption of contaminated eggs.

Phil Westwood, spokesman for the Free Range Egg and Poultry Association of Australia Inc (FREPAA), commented that “*The egg recall in the United States demonstrates the potential health problems associated with intensive farming. High flock densities generate major contamination issues for chickens and these can be transferred to humans in the food chain.*”

Earlier this month Humane Society International's U.S. partners, The Humane Society of the United States (HSUS), released a white paper addressing the threat that cage confinement of laying hens can pose to food safety. It included an assessment on the probabilities of *Salmonella* contamination among different housing systems. The paper revealed that there were 43% lower odds of *Salmonella* enteritidis contamination in cage-free barns, where hens are raised indoors, than in cage production.

It also reported that every single scientific study published in recent years comparing *Salmonella* contamination between cage and cage-free operations has found that confining hens in cages significantly increases *Salmonella* risk –

2010: 7.77 times greater odds of *Salmonella* in operations caging hens
2009: Significantly more risk of *Salmonella* in caged flocks
2008: 7.88 to 21.52 times greater odds of *Salmonella* in operations caging hens
2008: More than twice the prevalence of *Salmonella* in operations caging hens
2007: 1.8 to 25 times greater odds of *Salmonella* in operations caging hens
2007: 3.7 times greater prevalence of *Salmonella* in operations caging hens
2006: More than twice the prevalence of *Salmonella* in operations caging hens

Reason for concern should not be isolated to the U.S. In 2004, there was a reported *Salmonella* enteritidis outbreak in Queensland. It has been specifically noted by the Department of Health as a serious concern for primary industry due to risks of infections in egg-laying poultry.

"It is unfortunate that we have to wait for such significant epidemics until it is recognised that there are real health risks associated with intensive farming. Not only are such epidemics detrimental to hundreds of birds who live in unacceptable conditions, but impacts are directly affecting human populations." said HSI director, Verna Simpson. *"It is widely acknowledged that cage confinement of laying hens is inhumane. The fact that such major health risks are associated shows this method of production has to end. Intensive farming needs to be recognised as a significant risk to human health."*

True free range egg production is an alternative method of production which is becoming more and more popular in Australia for consumers. Not only because it means better animal welfare standards for poultry, but also because it provides a healthier environment for egg production and therefore poses less of a risk to humans.

Phil Westwood, FREPAA, highlights that *"True free range egg production provides a healthy and sustainable farm environment, which together with good flock management and handling procedures ensures food safety for consumers"*.