

What's Wrong with ‘Humanely Raised’ Poultry and Eggs?

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Chicken producers are misleading consumers with misinformation.



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On June 13th the animal advocacy organization Direct Action Everywhere (DxE) [rescued and reported](#) their removal of nineteen chickens from trucks delivering the 6-week old birds to a slaughterhouse in Sonoma County owned by Petaluma Poultry, a subsidiary of Perdue Farms. Petaluma Poultry markets its chickens as “free-range” and “organic” under brand names like Rocky and Rosie.

A [report](#) covering several investigations of Petaluma Poultry published by DxE the same day of June 13th shows scenes of sick, crippled, dying and dead chickens living in filth and being treated by workers with extreme cruelty. The report includes veterinary diagnoses of Petaluma Poultry chickens from several locations infected with zoonotic bacteria (transmissible to humans) in their blood and other body parts.

Petaluma Poultry is not an isolated case in an otherwise truthful industry targeting customers willing and able to pay high prices for “humanely-raised” chickens as opposed to “factory-farmed” birds.

Los Angeles-based Jidori Chicken provides yet another example of misleadingly marketed chickens “raised free range, humanely, at small farms in California.” From 2020 to 2022, slaughterhouse investigators for Slaughter Free Network [documented](#) “some of the worst animal abuse and filthy conditions we've ever seen,” in what surely must violate California’s sanitary and animal cruelty statutes.

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U.S. egg producers, like poultry meat producers, have similarly been shown by investigators to misrepresent how the hens whose high-priced eggs they market as humane, free-range, and organic are actually housed and treated.

An example is Nellie's Free Range Eggs. Owned by the New Hampshire-based company, Pete and Gerry's Organics, Nellie's Eggs, which can cost up to \$8 a dozen, are labeled "Certified Humane." In 2019, People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals filed a lawsuit alleging that Nellie's Eggs falsely depicts hens ranging on open pastures and being cuddled by children, when in fact Nellie's hens are crammed inside long confinement sheds holding 20,000 hens per shed with little more than a square foot of living space for each hen.

In 2009, I became involved with a farm called Black Eagle, which portrayed itself as "the largest organic, free-range, egg producer in the state of Virginia." The farm president said the hens had "places to roost inside, exposure to natural light and air, and access to the outside with an average of five feet of space per bird within a fenced yard."

Meanwhile, that same year, documents obtained by an attorney in the course of investigating a complaint about malnourished dogs at [Black Eagle Farm](#) revealed an absentee owner, unpaid bills, and malnourished pigs and sheep. Unexpectedly, a veterinarian with the Virginia Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services discovered a building with 25,000 hens described in her [report](#) as "thin to emaciated," with many dead and dying birds on the floor. Farm personnel told her the hens had been unfed for seven days in November, five days in December, and for two straight weeks earlier in the year.

Lest it be thought that the conditions I'm describing are rare or are no longer practiced by the majority of alternative egg producers, I must point out that, while some businesses may treat their hens better, investigations of alternative poultry and egg farms typically reveal practices and attitudes that do not meet consumer expectations – expectations that are cultivated not only by the companies and retailers they do business with, but also by animal welfarists who employ "humane" farming language that glosses over the facts with nebulous assertions and omissions. Omissions include, but are not limited to, showing hens foraging in a field while never showing them being grabbed upside down by their legs and thrown into gas-killing carts or transport crates. More often than not, the difference between "humane" farms and factory farms is moot.

In part the deception arises from the popular notion that free-range, cage-free, and organic farming is essentially a collection of small, local enterprises, distinct from industrialized operations like, say, Tyson Foods and Perdue Farms in the meat industry, or Cal-Maine and Rose Acres in the egg industry.

But as a 2019 report on the organic food industry in [The Washington Post](#) explains, contrary to the pristine image of organic egg production, "many conventional egg producers have organic subsidiaries that operate on a vast scale, 100,000 laying hens housed in a huge building, their federally mandated access to outdoor space winkingly fulfilled by screened porches."

The fact is that constricting and diminishing the life of animals is built into raising them for food. Their own food is chosen; their social, familial, and physical environment is controlled; their reproductive organs and activities are manipulated; and how long they live is determined by

humans. They can be abused and killed at will based on economic “necessity.” An example in poultry and egg production is the routine culling – removal from the flock for killing – of birds who are not gaining weight fast enough or laying enough eggs. Whatever compassion a person may initially feel for birds slated for commercialization, once they become a business, the business mentality takes over.

The business mentality prioritizes a commitment to soothing rhetoric over harsh reality, a shielding of the customer from the practical facts of animal farming with [palliative platitudes and pretenses](#). All agribusiness companies claim “high animal welfare standards.” But at best, it is only by comparison with the worst conditions and practices of industrialized animal farming that any commercial animal farm can claim to be “humane.”

For a close look at the issues presented in this article by a range of contributors, see the new book *The Humane Hoax: Essays Exposing the Myth of Happy Meat, Humane Dairy, and Ethical Eggs*, edited by Hope Bohanec, and published in 2023 by Lantern Publishing & Media.