

WHERE HAVE WE BEEN AND WHERE ARE WE HEADED?

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Our industry has adapted to many changes and found ways to remain viable. When we were asked to make changes our industry stepped up to create animal welfare standards. These were phased in to create better living environments for our birds without creating havoc with supply and gave everyone time to plan for the needed changes. This was pretty much done voluntarily, without government involvement. Truly our industry reacting to the desires of our customers.

Then along came Prop 2. For 5 years we debated what it really meant and how it might affect us as a whole. The proposal itself was written so vaguely that it was anyone's guess as to how it might all be resolved once 2015 came around.

Five years of speculation lead us all down separate paths. There was a big push toward enriched cages. These offered not only more space, but also perches, nests, and scratch areas. Many of these were built and field tested. This system offered some challenges, particularly in scratch pad areas and the sheer size of the bird colony. Many adjustments were made, including colony size, to create pleasant and productive environment for our birds.

Others took a free-range direction. Several new facilities have been started, with existing farms growing as well. This is a nice niche market that produces a value-added product and good profitability to the free-range producers. The main problem is a very limited market for this high price egg. The size of the production units are also very small and the large amount of land required make profitability a challenge.

The third path that has been chosen by many, leaving no doubt for these producers that they have selected the strong path, is cage-free. Cage-free in all probability will never be challenged. Our cage-free systems have evolved to offer many new features. Early cage-free systems allowed birds to walk and forage on the floor in dirt and fecal matter for the whole flock cycle. When our industry recognized the issues with these original designs it got busy with new innovations and designs.

Today, our multi-tier aviary cage-free systems are amazing. We have designed systems totally for the bird's comfort. Systems designed are built to complement the bird's natural instincts in multi-tier systems. We find the stronger, more dominant birds moving up in the system leaving space on the lower levels for weaker less dominant birds. Flock sizes have moved up from 2,500 bird flocks to over 165,000. What a change! Even 10 years ago we could never have imagined these flock sizes. In the old systems the birds ate too much, laid too little, and died in larger numbers.

Cage-free production today has turned the corner. We find feed consumption or conversion to be very competitive with cage birds. Egg production and peaks are also on par with their cage system counterparts. Mortality is also good as these strong vibrant birds don't die in such large numbers. The main area of additional expense, we are finding, is labor. Additional labor can be minimized through the use of proper cage-free pullet systems. Getting the birds grown properly is the answer to your profitability as a cage-free layer producer.

A well-managed, profitable, cage-free layer building may be the answer to all your problems as an egg producer both in today's and tomorrow's business environment.

Why not try one?