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UK Government urged to ban illegal eggs

Prime Minister David Cameron is being urged to take tough action and ban imports into the UK of 'illegal' eggs from European battery farmed hens from 1 January 2012 or risk crippling the UK egg industry.

The stark message comes today at the beginning of British Egg Week (October 10 to 16) and ahead of new EU rules which come into force on January 1 2012 which ban the use of battery cages. Instead hens can be kept in enriched colony cages, which provide them with more space and a higher standard of welfare.

UK egg producers have spent £400m to replace the old cages with the more spacious and comfortable new ones to meet the new legislation. A total of 90% of British Lion cage eggs already come from the new system and all will be up to the new standards by 1 January. However, many egg producers in other European countries will flout the ban by continuing to use illegal battery cages – and will sell these eggs to the UK.

A hard-hitting new report commissioned by the British Egg Industry Council (BEIC) reveals that more than a third of EU cage egg production will break the new rules – that's 84m hens kept in battery cages. Given that 20% of the UK's egg needs come from imported eggs, it will be inevitable that millions of illegal eggs will be imported unless tough action is taken now. The report warns: "There is a genuine danger that after this date illegal battery cage eggs will be imported into the UK undermining the market and distorting prices."

The independent report, compiled by the European Food and Farming Partnerships (EFFP), experts in agriculture and food businesses, highlights the fact that the egg industry is one of the UK farming and food industry's great success stories. The report says that British egg producers have overcome huge hurdles and invested heavily in modern production techniques to now offer the highest food safety standards in the world, bringing rising sales.

All this has been achieved without direct subsidies from the EU or the UK Government. Now UK egg producers fear that all of this effort and success will be wasted because of a flood of cheap, illegal egg imports.

Mark Williams, Chief Executive of the BEIC, said: “The lack of action from the European Commission so far is staggering. EU member states have had more than 12 years to get their houses in order and comply with the new legislation, so there should be no excuses. British egg producers have invested heavily to meet their legal obligations only to see their efforts jeopardised by a lack of political will. The European Commission needs to act now to ensure that UK producers do not suffer at the hands of illegal eggs and egg products. The Commission can no longer hide its head in the sand - immediate and decisive action is required now.

“While the UK government continues to be supportive of British egg producers it has failed to back this up with any real action. We’d like to see a complete ban on eggs and egg products that don’t comply with the rules, to ensure that British consumers know exactly what they are getting. The Government has to come off the fence and find a practical enforcement solution.”

The EFPF report has revealed that a total of 13 EU countries will have egg producers that break the impending rules – including in France, Spain and Italy.

The European Commission says that it is the Member States who are responsible for enforcing the ban. However, the Department for the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Defra) says that in practice it will be impossible to stop the illegal eggs from entering the UK. Farming Minister James Paice MP has said that the only way of ensuring this would be to ban all eggs from countries that do not comply with the new rules – although Defra has so far remained uncommitted to such a ban.

The new EFPF report tackles the issue of potential illegal use by UK food manufacturers, retailers and caterers and finds that all too often the response is weak or non-effective, with firms sometimes not taking responsibility for proper egg sourcing. The report says: “Food manufacturers have indicated their wish to comply but believe it is also the responsibility of governments to ensure egg production is compliant with the law. Anecdotal evidence suggests that the main difficulty will be in ensuring that imported shell or processed egg used in manufacturing and catering products will be compliant.”

The report finds that the most likely foods to contain illegal eggs are scotch eggs, sandwiches, quiches, cakes and Yorkshire pudding.

Mark Williams said: “At a time when the UK’s economic health is paramount, we’re urging David Cameron to help us and ensure that British egg production is not allowed to be undermined because of a flood of cheap, illegal imports from Europe. If action is not taken, the British egg industry could go the way of our pig industry, which has suffered a dramatic decline over the last decade because of new rules which the UK introduced ahead of other countries.

“If the European Commission and our own government refuse to take action, we urge all consumers to make sure they buy legal eggs by only buying British ones. Look for the British Lion mark on eggs – this denotes eggs produced to a stringent code of practice incorporating the latest research and advice from scientists and vets. British Lion eggs account for more than 85% of UK egg production. In addition, we ask that all retailers, food manufacturers, processors and caterers use only eggs that are proven to come from producers that meet the new rules.”

National Farmers’ Union President Peter Kendall said: “British egg producers have put their businesses on the line by investing £400 million to convert to enriched cages ahead of the ban. Consumers and the food industry should back British egg producers as failure to do so could see the UK egg sector going the same way as the pig sector, which has halved in size since the Government imposed a unilateral ban on stalls and tethers in the 1990s.”

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Editor’s notes

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