

Evaluation of Two Laying Systems (Floor vs. Cage) on Egg Production, Quality, and Safety

Victor G Stanley*, Dacian Nelson and Milton B Daley

Prairie View A&M University, Prairie, USA

Abstract

A study was conducted to evaluate the effects of two laying systems (floor versus cage) on egg production, egg quality, and microbial safety. One hundred and eighty 42 wk old laying hens were separated into two groups of 90 hens each, and housed in laying cages and a floor laying system. Eggs from the hens were collected for 2 weeks, and hen-day egg production, egg quality (whole egg, albumen, yolk, and shell weights), saleable eggs and marketable were measured. Total bacteria counts on the egg shell surface were also enumerated at 0, 4, and 8 h after laying. Results indicated that hen-day egg production by hens in the cage system (95%) was significantly ($P < .05$) higher than production by hens from the floor system (85%), but there was no significant differences in egg weight, albumen, yolk, or shell weights. Hens housed in the cage laying systems produced significantly ($P < .05$) more marketable eggs (95%) than hens housed in the floor laying system (89%). Significantly ($P < .05$) more unsaleable eggs were also produced by hens in the floor laying system (11%) than in the cage system (4%). Bacteria counts on egg shells from hens of the cage laying system were significantly ($P < .05$) lower at 0 and 4 h after laying (4.02 and 5.90 log cfu/ml, respectively) than counts on shells of eggs from the floor laying system (6.58 and 7.25 log cfu/ml, respectively). There was no significant difference in contamination of eggs collected 8 h after laying. Findings indicate hens housed in cages produce more eggs with higher quality and less bacterial contamination than hens house in floors laying systems.

Keywords: Laying systems; Egg production; Bacteria counts

Introduction

The sale of eggs like all other farm products is driven by consumer demand and perception. Many consumers currently believe cage-free, organically produced eggs have higher quality and are safer for consumption than eggs from hens housed in cage systems. There is also concern about the welfare of the birds that are housed in cage systems. Jones et al. [1] reported that consumer concern has led to new challenges for poultry growers. *Salmonella* Enteritidis has been identified as one of the major pathogens associated with raw and undercooked shell eggs and egg products. With the focus on food safety and the welfare of birds, alternative systems to the conventional system are being introduced [2-4]. The demand for cage-free or organic eggs is creating a trend that is shifting towards free-range and floor-reared birds. De Rue et al. [4] stated that the shift from conventional cage systems has increased the incidence of microbial contamination and reduced the quality of egg shells, especially eggs produced during warmer months. Ellen et al. [5] reported that the concentration of dust accumulated in the floor housing system, contributes to higher contamination of eggs with bacteria compared to hens raised in the cage systems. Also, Protais et al. [2] and De Rue et al. [4] reported higher egg shell contamination by mesophilic, aerobic bacteria in perchery system compared to conventional cages. High levels of external shell contamination can significantly affect shelf-life and safety of eggs [6]. De Buck et al. [7] stated that bacterial contamination on egg shell can affect shelf-life when the bacteria attached on to the shell surface. According to Mollenhorst et al. [8] cage system with wet manure increases the risk of contamination in contrast to cage system with dry manure, while Van den Brand et al. [9] observed that egg shell quality decreases with age in cage birds compared to outdoor birds and suggested that egg shell thickness in relation to housing system could be used as a bio-indicator for the health and production of layers. Peebles et al. [10] and Silversides and Scott [11] and Pavlovski et al. [12] indicated that the effect of age on yolk and albumen percentage and yolk-albumen ratio decreases with age in the cage layers with no variable differences in albumen height

with increase age of the hen. The objective of the present study was to examine the difference in egg production and bacterial contamination of eggs from hens housed in conventional laying cage or in a floor laying system.

Materials and Methods

One hundred and eighty 42 wk old Single Comb White Leghorn (SCWL) hens (Hy-line®W36) were selected at random from a larger flock of hens and assigned to two treatment groups in a complete random design. Ninety hens were placed in the cage laying system, 90 hens were placed in the floor laying system, and hens in each system were separated into groups of 30 to provide three replicates for each treatment. Two weeks prior to the start of the study, all hens were placed on diet formulated to closely match the recommendation of the National Research Council (Table 1). Hens were provided feed and water at ad libitum and exposed to 16 h incandescent light/day, throughout the study. The two laying systems (cage and floor) were located in the same building, separated by a small feed storage room with similar environmental temperature and relative air humidity. The conventional cages (640 cm²) area consisted of two rows of two tiers, with each row containing 45 cages housing 90 hens, with 2 hens per cage. The commercial conventional cages measured 30.5×35.56×50.8 cm, the floor laying system was an area of 2708 sq ft that was covered with wood shavings. The laying area was divided into three identical pens of 90 sq ft in area. Each floor pen consisted of a single nest box

*Corresponding author: Victor G Stanley, Prairie View A&M University, Prairie, USA, E-mail: adjackson@pvamu.edu

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Ingredient	Percentage
Yellow Corn	55.93
Soybean Meal (44% CP)	22.10
Alfalfa Meal (17% CP)	5.00
Meat and Bone Meal (50% CP)	3.00
Animal and Vegetable Fat	3.00
Limestone	8.22
Di-calcium Phosphate	1.15
Iodine Salt	0.25
Vitamin Trace Mineral Premix ¹	1.50
Calculated Values	
Crude Protein (%)	17.00
ME kcal/kg	2830
Crude fat (%)	4.00
Phosphorus (available) (%)	0.35
Calcium (%)	3.20
Methionine (%)	0.34
Methionine and Cystine (%)	0.62
Lysine (%)	0.76

¹As-fed basis

Per kilogram of diet: Vitamin A (as Vitamin A outtake) 12,000 IU; cholecalciferol (as-fed basis) 3000 IU; Vitamin E (as x-tocopheryl acetate) 20 IU; Menadione Sodium bisulfite, 2.0 mg; Thiamine, 1.5 mg; riboflavin, 8.0 mg; niacin, 3000 mg; pantothenic acid, 150 mg; pyridoxine, 40 mg; vitamin B12, 15 ug; folic acid, 1.0 mg; biotin, 150 ug; Cobalt, .2 mg; Copper, 10 mg; iron, 80 mg; Iodine, 1.0 mg; Manganese, 120 mg; zinc, 120 mg; Selenium, .2 mg; butylated hydroxytoluene (BHT), 150 mg; zinc bacitracin, 20 mg.

Table 1: Composition of diet.

to accommodate 30 hens in each pen and was equipped with a plastic feeder (16 inches in diameter) and an automatic plastic (plassum type) water drinker.

Data collection

Eggs were collected 3 times daily at 4 h intervals from each treatment group. Egg production, egg weight, and saleable ability were recorded daily. Eggs were collected and analyzed weekly for yolk, albumen, and shell weights. Five eggs from each treatment group were separated from each daily production. These eggs were cracked open with the aid of a spatula, and the yolk, albumen, and shell were separated and weighed individually. Egg weights were expressed as percent of the whole egg (relative weight).

Bacterial enumeration

Ten eggs from each 4 h collection period were placed into 400 ml of Butterfield buffer solution and stored for 24 h at 32 F, after which they were then placed in a Stomacher bag containing Butterfield stock solution and rubbed for 60 seconds as described by De Rue et al. [4]. One ml of the egg wash was serially diluted and the diluents were plated on tryptic soy nutrient agar, to examine the growth of microorganisms. The plates were incubated for 24 h at 36 C, and colony-forming-units (cfu) were counted. The counts were transformed to logarithms for statistical analysis.

Data analysis

All data were analyzed by ANOVA, using the General Linear Models procedures of SAS[®] (SAS Institute, 2000). Significant differences among the two treatment means were determined using Duncan's multiple range test (1955) with a predetermined 5% probability level.

Results

Percent hen-day production, unsaleable, and marketable eggs for

hens reared in conventional cages and on floor litter are presented in Table 2. There were significant differences ($P < .05$) in egg production, unsaleable and marketable eggs between the two rearing systems when the data were analyzed using the ANOVA procedure. The result showed that hens reared in the conventional cage system had significantly ($P < .05$) higher egg production (95%) compared to hens reared in the floor system (85%). There were significantly ($P < .05$) higher percentage (11%) of unsaleable eggs from hens reared on the floor system compared to the conventional cage system (4%). The percentage of marketable eggs (95%) was significantly ($P < .05$) higher for hens placed in the conventional cage system than hens placed in the floor system (89%). Table 3 shows the results for egg weight, albumen, yolk, and shell weights. There were no significant differences between the two rearing systems for any of the parameters measured. However, there were significant ($P < .05$) differences in the bacteria load recovered from the shell of the eggs collected at the first collection (8:00 am) and the second collection period (4:00 pm) (Table 4). The total bacteria counts for eggs collected from the floor laying system at 8:00 am, (5.85×10^8 cfu/ml), were significantly ($P < .05$) higher than the bacteria counts collected on eggs from the cage system (3.75×10^8 cfu/ml). Bacterial contamination of eggs collected during the second collection period from the egg shells in the floor system was significantly ($P < .05$) higher (7.15×10^8 cfu/ml) than bacterial contamination (5.85×10^8 cfu/ml) of egg shells collected from the cage system. The bacterial count recovered from the eggs collected 4 h after laying in the floor system, was significantly ($P < .05$) higher (7.15×10^8 cfu/ml) compared to those (5.85×10^8 cfu/ml) collected from egg shell from the cage system. No significant differences were observed in total bacteria counts on the egg shell between the two laying systems when the eggs were collected 8 h after laying.

Systems	Hen-Day Production (%)	Unsaleable ¹ eggs (%)	Marketable ² eggs (%)
Cage layers	95 ^a	4 ^b	95 ^a
Floor layers	85 ^b	11 ^a	89 ^b
SEM	10.61	3.94	6.16

^{a,b}Means within columns with no common superscripts differ significantly ($P < .05$).

¹Saleable eggs are eggs considered broken, misshaped, and cracked.

²Marketable eggs are the difference in hen-day production and unsaleable eggs.

Table 2: Difference between conventional cage and floor laying systems on total egg production, saleable eggs, and marketable eggs.

Systems	Mean weight (g)			
	Egg	Albumen	Yolk	Shell
Cage layers	64 ^a	39.4 ^a	21.05 ^a	8.89 ^a
Floor layers	62 ^a	38.29 ^a	20.05 ^a	9.27 ^a
SEM	2.11	2.11	1.12	0.72

^{a,b}Means within columns with no common superscripts differ significantly ($P < .05$).

Mean egg weights was calculated over 14 day period.

Ten eggs from each treatment, at each period ($n=10$)

Table 3: The difference between conventional cage and floor laying systems on total egg, albumen, yolk, and shell weights.

Systems	Total bacteria ¹ Counts (cfu)		
	0 ²	4 ²	8 ²
Cage layers	4.02 ^b	5.96 ^b	7.25 ^a
Floor layers	6.58 ^a	7.25 ^a	7.35 ^a
SEM	1.89	0.96	0.05

^{a,b}Means within columns with no common superscripts differ significantly ($P < .05$).

¹Total bacteria counts (log cfu/ml).

²Represents period of the days when eggs were collected.

Table 4: The differences between cage and floor laying system on bacterial counts on eggs over three collection periods.

Discussion

In the commercial egg production laying hens are managed at high densities. As a result, the environment in which the hens are raised is normally actively managed to encourage optimum productivity levels. The difference between the laying systems is that the cage system is better suited for large egg production. Therefore, better control of the environment, water and feed qualities, less fecal contamination of the eggs, with less un-saleable eggs are critical for economic success. Clean drinkers and feeders are not easily maintained to protect the hens from the impact of outside environment in the non-conventional system. Isolation of the hens from fecal material in floor operation is essential to provide clean eggs with less bacterial contamination. Comparing the fecal contamination of eggs laid in different types of housing systems, Protais et al. [2] and De Reu et al. [4] found total bacterial counts of egg shells were higher in floor system compared with conventional cage system. The bacterial count of the current study on eggs collected from the floor system was 6.58 log cfu/ml compared to 4.02 log cfu/ml for the eggs from the cage system at the zero hour collection. A higher shell bacteria count on eggs from organic and free range farms been previously reported by De Rue et al. [4]. Guillam et al. [13] reported higher dust contamination in perchery rearing systems compared to cage poultry houses. Radon et al. [14] attributed the high bacteria load on floor system eggs to a high concentration of airborne bacteria. The difference in bacteria load observed in the current study between the two systems may have been associated with feces on the shell. Tauson et al. [15] in an earlier study reported a higher percentage of dirty eggs from floor hens than cage. Furthermore, floor eggs are likely to be damaged or spoiled and are far more easily contaminated [2], and results of the current study indicated that there were a higher percentage of un-saleable and less marketable eggs due to cracks and breakages in eggs collected from the floor system. Interestingly, the differences between the two systems in bacteria count were minimal, not significant after 8 h of laying, suggesting that eggs should be collected before 4 h after laying to minimize the accumulation of bacteria on shell eggs since after 4 h the contamination of bacteria increases in each system. Egg laying systems are designed for low production cost with a high degree of mechanism to increase production and egg quality [16]. Because of the low stocking density of free-range systems egg production is lower and is more expensive to produce and as such demand significant market premium to be competitive [17]. Tauson et al. [15] reported that egg production of laying hens was higher in conventional cage than those housed in alternative systems such as floor pens. Higher egg production may be due to greater efficiency in feed utilization, as the dietary energy is converted more efficiently to egg production due to the hen confinement. Conversely, hens in floor pens use more feed energy for exercising, scratching, and bathing in the litter. In conclusion, the result shows that there are significant differences in total egg production, marketable egg production, and eggs with lower microbial contamination between eggs from conventional cage systems and floor laying systems. Hen-day egg production is significantly higher for the cage system and with more marketable eggs allowing for lower egg cost. Eggs with less bacterial contamination are safer and have a longer shelf-life. An indication of an overall healthy environment for the birds is the condition of the litter in the floor system. Litter prevents the birds from directly contacting the floor, dilution of feces, resulting in the reduction of bacteria, toxins, and parasites. Poorly managed litter in large floor houses reduces the ability of litter to dilute feces, creating an avenue for the birds to peck at the litter, increasing the intake of bacteria. High stocking density in floor systems impact litter quality, which will affect egg production, quality, and safety. Finally, to enhance food safety, the

eggs should be collected at least 4 h after laying to minimize bacterial contamination.

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