

Animal Rights Group's Video of Hens Raises Questions, but Not Just for Farms

By Stephanie Strom and Sabrina Tavernise

Jan. 8, 2015

An animal rights group released on Thursday a disturbing video of laying hens at a farm in Northern California that supplies eggs to Whole Foods and Organic Valley, among other retailers and distributors.

The group, Direct Action Everywhere, contended that the hens' treatment was inhumane and said it planned to protest this weekend at Whole Foods stores in a number of American cities.

The hens in the video belong to Petaluma Farms, whose owners assert that the group is distorting and exaggerating the conditions under which its organic and conventional eggs are raised and sold under the brands Judy's Family Farm and Rock Island. It also supplies eggs sold by Whole Foods stores in Northern California under the grocer's 365 label, and it accounts for more than 4 percent of the eggs sold by Organic Valley.

This latest dispute over the treatment of animals used in food production provides an example of how prevalent the use of graphic videos as a publicity tactic is becoming. But these videos can also be mystifying, if not misleading, for consumers paying attention to the varying certification standards of humane treatment available to producers and companies selling animal-based food.

According to Wayne Hsiung, a founder of Direct Action Everywhere, the video was obtained by a small team of activists who climbed over a barbed wire fence into a Petaluma Farms facility at 700 Cavanaugh Lane, in Petaluma, Calif., about 10 times between the summer of 2013 and last fall.

Barns there house hens raised according to organic standards, producing eggs certified as organic, as well as laying hens that are raised conventionally, according to Steve Mahrt, the owner of Petaluma Farms.

The welfare of the organic birds at the Cavanaugh Lane facility, as well as a few organic hens housed at another Petaluma Farms location, has also met the standards of Certified Humane, an animal welfare certification program operated by the nonprofit group Humane Farm Animal Care.

While Mr. Hsiung criticized Whole Foods' animal welfare policy, calling a five-step program "five steps of cruelty," the egg producer took exception to the generalizations made by the group.

Mr. Mahrt said the video produced by Direct Action Everywhere "isn't anywhere indicative of our operation — they had to go through 15 barns off and on over a year to find three chickens they could use to make their point in this video."



An image from a Direct Action Everywhere video of hens at a California farm that supplies organic and conventional eggs. Direct Action Everywhere

He said he was confident that only three birds were featured in the video and that none were from his organic flock.

For his part, Mr. Hsiung said Direct Action Everywhere had found dozens of chickens in poor condition but had highlighted only a few in the video.

Still, experts debated exactly what was wrong with the hens shown in the video. Is the forlorn-looking, nearly bald hen a victim of feather pecking, a behavioral tic acquired by chickens in close quarters? Or is the hen simply molting?

Andrew Gunther, program director of Animal Welfare Approved, another certification group, said he saw signs in the video of feather-pecking, molting and treading, which happens when a rooster cleans its claws on a hen's back while having intimate relations. "It's pretty difficult to audit by photograph, but what I'm seeing is very poor management, not systemic failure," Mr. Gunther said.

And what Direct Action Everywhere called "debeaking" was described by Mr. Gunther and other experts as "beak trimming" or "tipping," in which a portion of the beak is removed to prevent a chicken in close quarters from feather-pecking and cannibalism.

Trimming is allowed by Certified Humane, but only when done by an expert and before a bird is 10 days old. "With any group of more than 110 hens together, you have feather-pecking and the risk of cannibalism, and we don't think that's good animal welfare," said Adele Douglass, the founder of Humane Farm Animal Care.

Ms. Douglass said Petaluma Farms' certification had expired in June. She said it had applied for recertification but, because of staffing issues at her organization, the inspection required to renew the certification has not yet been done.

The video also pinpoints differences that arise through certification from one source or another. Certified Humane allows trimming, Animal Welfare Approved does not. "A lot of the behaviors that you're trimming beaks for are the result of tight confinement," Mr. Gunther said. "Instead of trimming, you can let birds go outdoors; you can change the breed."

A consumer, however, has almost no quick way of recognizing the varied criteria among a number of groups offering certification.

Only organic certification is designated by a single seal, indicating compliance with a federal law. "Other than doing some personal research and going online to see what different certification labels require, it gets tricky for consumers — and for us, too," said A. C. Gallo, president and chief operating officer of Whole Foods.

Whole Foods, which also sells Petaluma's Rock Island, Uncle Eddie's and Judy's brands, has just begun giving suppliers its own set of required humane standards for laying hens. As part of that process, a Whole Foods executive toured Petaluma Farms in February, but did not see anything resembling what was shown in the video, Mr. Gallo said.

A correction was made on Jan. 8, 2015: Because of an editing error, an earlier version of this article misattributed a comment. It was Mr. Gallo of Whole Foods, not Mr. Gunther of Animal Welfare Approved, who said that a Whole Foods executive who toured Petaluma Farms did not see anything that resembled what the video depicted.

When we learn of a mistake, we acknowledge it with a correction. If you spot an error, please let us know at nytnews@nytimes.com. [Learn more](#)

A version of this article appears in print on , Section B, Page 3 of the New York edition with the headline: Animal Rights Group's Video of Hens Raises Questions, but Not Just for Farms