

Do not compromise your cage-free housing

Combination ('combi') housing for laying hens

Combination ('combi') or convertible housing systems for laying hens feature aspects of both aviaries and conventional cages. Combi systems are multi-tiered structures that have doors so although birds can roam when the doors are open, the system converts into a caged system when the doors are closed. These systems are promoted as offering management and production benefits and are marketed to maximize stocking density and have the ability to be operated in total confinement if market pressures around cage-free production change.

When the doors are closed birds are confined at a stocking density comparable to that associated with conventional cages and the systems lack key features that encourage natural behaviour such as the provision of sufficient nesting or scratching opportunities.



Combi system with doors open



Combi system with doors closed

Combi systems are not a suitable alternative cage free system for the following reasons:

- The system provides the potential for birds to be confined in cages either routinely or permanently
- Stocking density is comparable to conventional systems when birds are confined
- Using doors routinely can potentially lead to increased levels of frustration and associated negative behaviours among birds as they transfer between the aviary environment and confinement
- Key features and equipment to encourage important behaviours such as nesting and scratching are lacking

Also beware of selected access systems which confine hens to particular areas within the tiers. Hens should have access to the full tier at all times and be encouraged to move within and between tiers with ease, via well positioned ramps.

It is worth while noting, that aviary doors are often incorporated into well designed multi-tier systems allowing for birds to be temporarily confined for management purposes (for example during in-water vaccination). Key features of good design for cage-free housing can be found at: <https://www.compassioninfoodbusiness.com/media/7428685/higher-welfare-systems-for-laying-hens-practical-options.pdf>

In summary, when assessing alternative systems to cages, producers and corporates committing to cage-free production, should invest in systems that will be fit for the future, and that maximize the holistic welfare of the laying hen. Half-caged systems, combi-systems, or routinely closing aviaries will be viewed negatively, compromise the welfare of the hen, and present reputational risk and an unwise investment in a system that may be outdated and outlawed well before the end of its commercial life-span.