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The Future of Laying Hen Welfare Policy

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The Layer Industry: The Next Decade
Teagasc Conference –25th April 2023

Presentation Overview

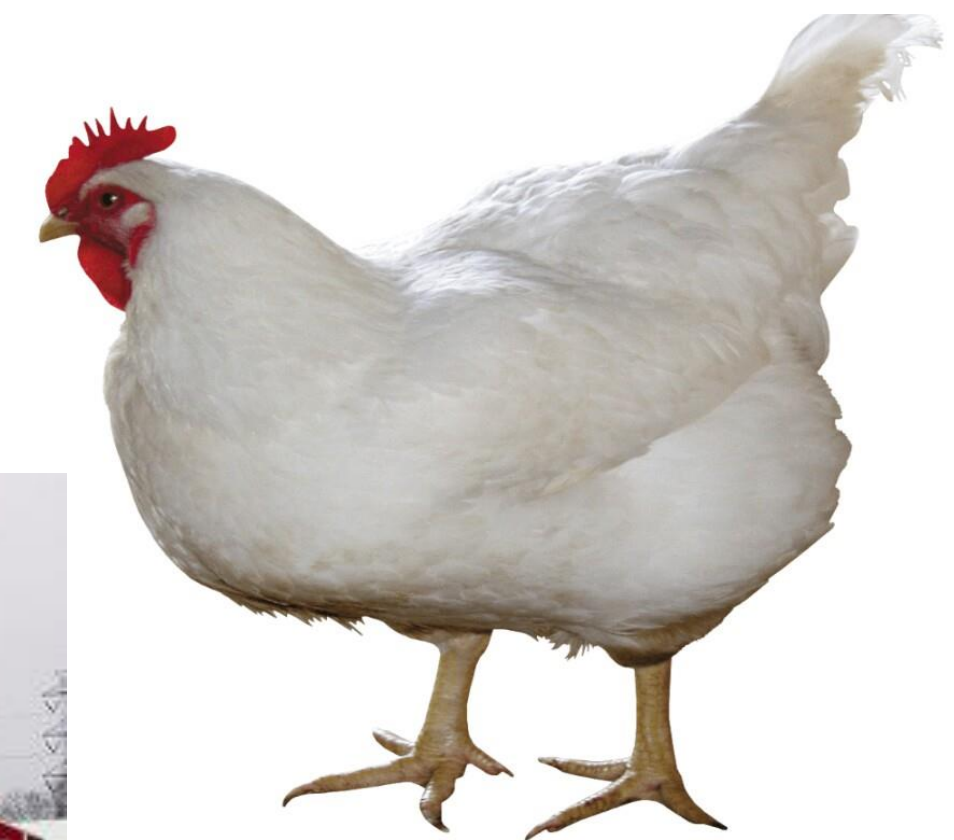
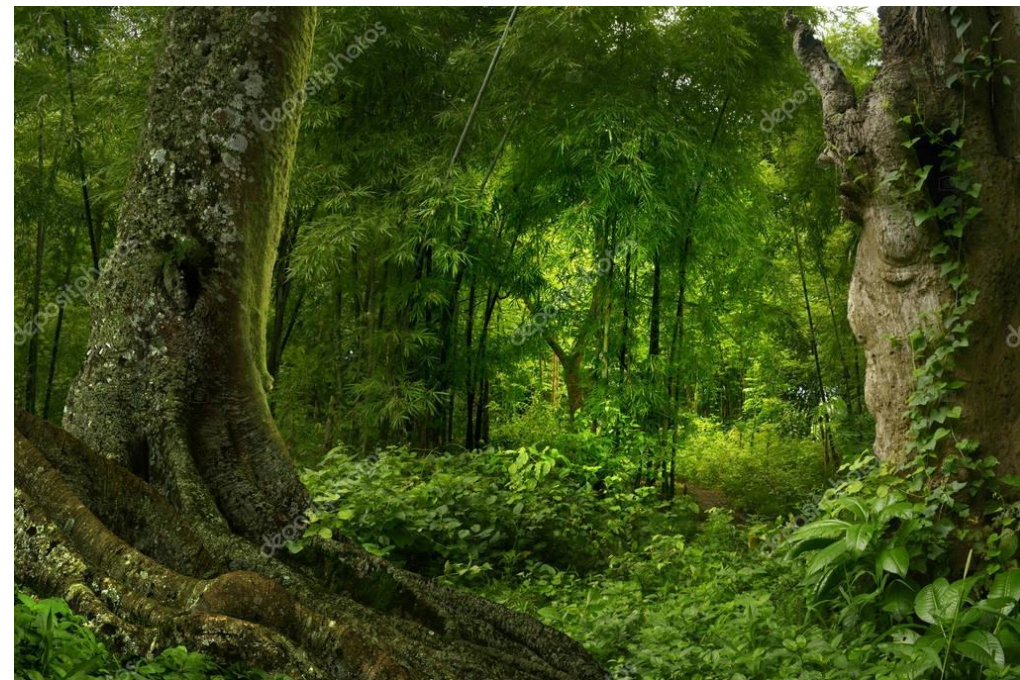


1. Background: Ireland and EU Context
2. European Food Safety Authority (EFSA) Laying Hens Opinion
3. Key Recommendations
4. Minimum Enclosure Characteristics
5. Best Practice Hens Project

WHAT IS GOOD WELFARE?



“An animal is in a good state of welfare if its physical and mental needs are met and it is coping with the conditions in which it lives”





1. BACKGROUND: IRELAND AND EU CONTEXT

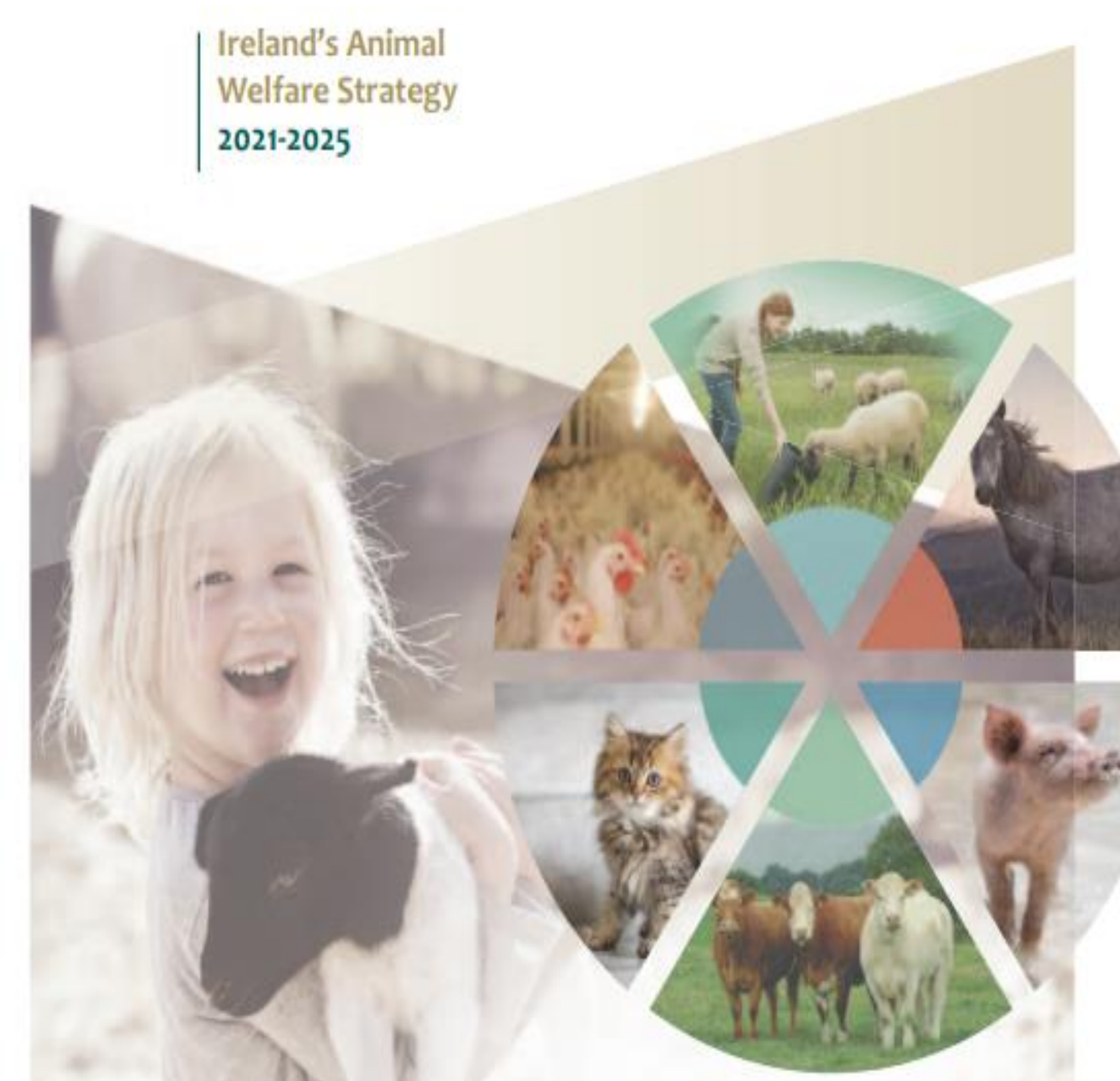
IRELAND'S 'ANIMAL WELFARE STRATEGY'



Vision:

“Ireland becomes increasingly recognised as a country that actively promotes and safeguards the welfare of all animals”

Growing citizen demand & political focus



EUROPEAN GREEN DEAL AND FARM TO FORK



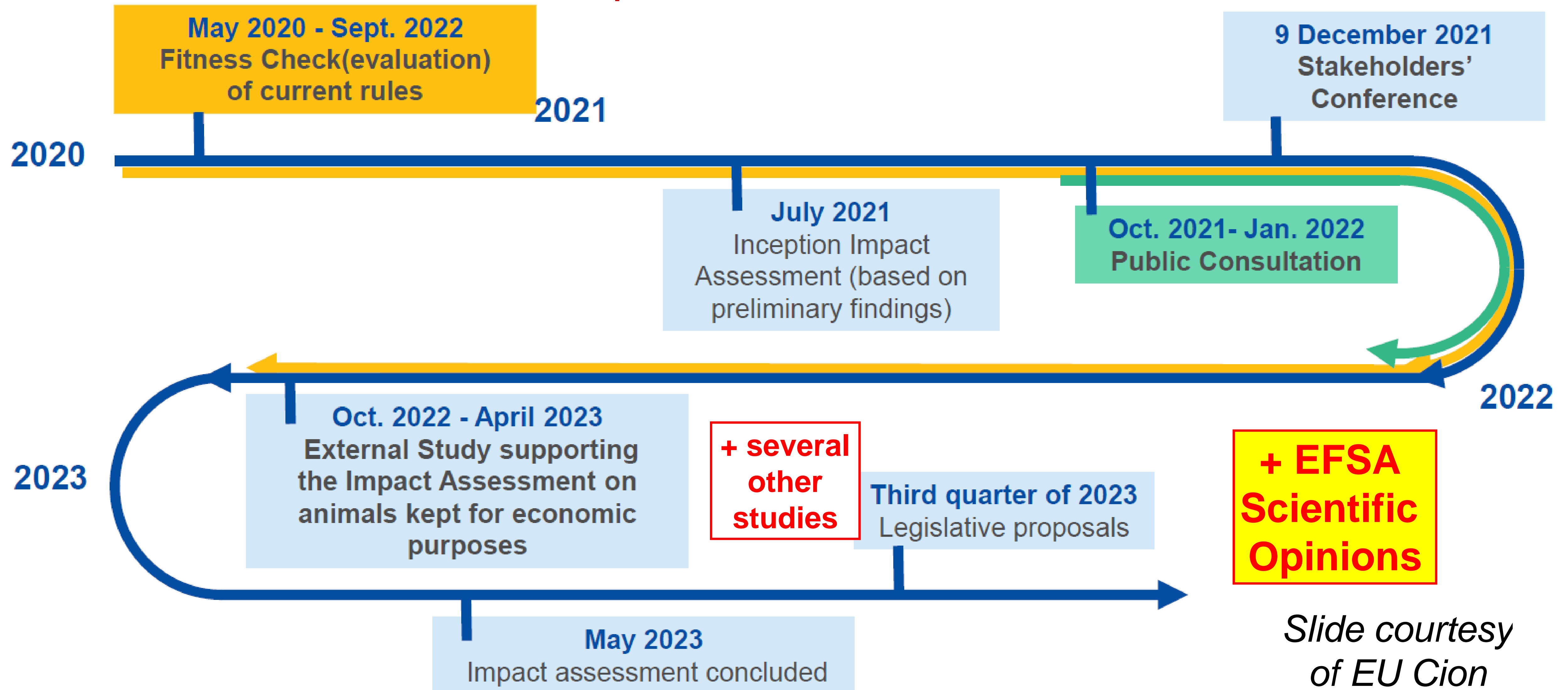
- **European Green Deal:** climate-neutral by 2050
- **Farm to Fork Strategy (F2F):** May 2020
- Sustainability all along the food-chain
- Animal welfare -integral part of strategy
- Revision of animal welfare legislation
- Considering options for EU animal welfare label



“Better animal welfare improves animal health and food quality, reduces the need for medication and can help preserve biodiversity.”

WELFARE LEGISLATION REVIEW PROCESS

Impact Assessment



‘END THE CAGE AGE’



- Growing public concern around animal welfare
- EU Citizens’ Initiative: Launched October 2018
- End cages for *all* farmed animals, including hens
- 1.4 million signatures, 18 Member States, supported by around 170 organisations
- Commission responded: ambitious objective and timeframes- 2027 target



“Commission intends to propose to phase out and finally prohibit the use of such cage systems, for all these species and categories, under conditions (including the length of the transition period) to be determined based on EFSA opinions and an impact assessment”



2. EFSA OPINION ON LAYING HENS

EFSA OPINION ON LAYING HENS



- Published 21st February 2023
- Cover **laying hen breeders, chicks and pullets and laying hens during production**
- 188-page document <https://www.efsa.europa.eu/en/efsajournal/pub/7789>
- 2 page 'plain language summary' of main findings
- Science/research based findings
- 11 Welfare Consequences
- 96 Conclusions
- 116 Recommendations



EFSA OPINION



General Topics

Specific Topics

1. Current husbandry systems

2. Relevant welfare consequences

3. Animal-based measures to assess welfare

4. Hazards leading to welfare consequences

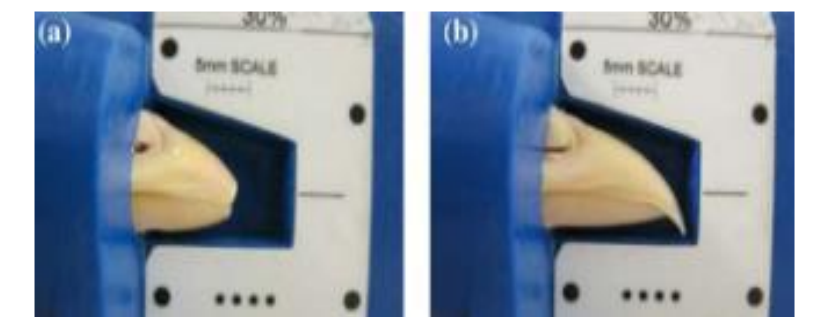
5. Recommendations to prevent/address

1. Welfare in caged systems

2. Beak trimming and risks with non trimmed

3. ABMs to collect at slaughter

4. (Welfare of male chicks)



11 HIGHLY RELEVANT WELFARE CONSEQUENCES



Bone lesions (incl. fractures and dislocations)

Group stress

Inability to avoid unwanted sexual behaviour

Inability to perform exploratory or foraging behaviour

Inability to perform comfort behaviour

Isolation stress

Predation stress

Restriction of movement

Resting problems

Skin disorders (other than soft tissue lesions and integument damage)

Soft tissue lesions and integument damage





3. KEY RECOMMENDATIONS

House all birds in non-cage systems



Why?

- *Ability to perform comfort behaviour*
- *Ability to perform exploratory and foraging behaviour*
- *Freedom of movement*
- *Isolation stress avoided*

Minimum height in system

- 55 cm laying hens
- 77cm layer breeders
- 45 cm pullets > 6wks old

3300cm² wing flapping
1000cm² stretching
1100cm² preening/bathing

Height of enclosure:

- At least 2 metres



Provide elevated platforms and/or perches

Why?

- *Fulfils behavioural need to roost*
- *Allows all birds simultaneous resting*
- *Allows the ability to escape from each other*
- Easily accessible, elevated platforms and/or perches
- Available from 3 weeks old
- Non-slippery perches: 3 - 6cm diameter
- Ramps to access elevated structures
- $< 40^\circ$ descents – ramps and platforms
- Perch space: Min. 18 cm/hen and 14 cm/pullets



Provide a covered veranda for all birds

Why?

- *Supports exploration, foraging and dustbathing*
- *Provide natural light and fresh air*
- *Provides choice*
- *Reduces stocking density during day*

- 20% additional space minimum
- Accessible during day, closable
- Longer side open (grid/mesh) (possibility to close off)
- Solid roof
- Min. height 2 metres
- Dry friable litter
- Provide enrichments



Provide litter at all times supplemented by other enrichments

Why?

- *Supports comfort, foraging and exploratory behaviours*
- *Reduces risk of injurious pecking*
- *Naturally shortens beaks*

- Provide dry and friable litter from Day 1
- Always available
- At least 1/3 available area

- Enrichment additional to the litter for dustbathing

- Edible enrichment from Day 1 and onwards



Why?

Phase out beak trimming

- Beak trimming causes:
 - *Causes pain –short and longer term*
 - *Reduces ability to preen, remove mites*
 - *Reduces ability to explore/forage*
- Implement preventive measures against injurious pecking
- Exploratory/foraging substrates early on- Day 1
- Use of brooders
- Pecking blocks/abrasive material to blunt beaks
- Reduce stocking density
- Cage –free systems



Reduce male aggression



Why?

- *Male aggression can cause skin and tissue damage- wounds*
- *Unwanted sexual behaviour*
- *Females avoid litter area*

- Male : female ratio 1:10
- Synchronous sexual development
- Breed males for gentle mating behaviour
- Claw/spur shortening devices
- Spatial partitions in litter area- allows escape
- Elevated structures- perches and platforms
- Monitor breeding flocks



Rear pullets with dark brooders

Why?

- *Provide warmer area for resting*
- *Reduces fearfulness during rearing and laying period*
- *Reduced fearfulness- reduced panic events & group stress*
- *Reduces feather pecking- reduced plumage & skin injuries*
- *Less aggressive birds*
- *Reduces cannibalism*



Genetic selection for positive welfare traits



Why?

Examples:

- *Reduced feather pecking*
- *Less fearful birds- reduced piling, smothering*
- *Less aggressive males*
- *Reduced risk of bone lesions and keel bone fractures*
- *Blunter beaks*
- *Smaller combs in white breeds*



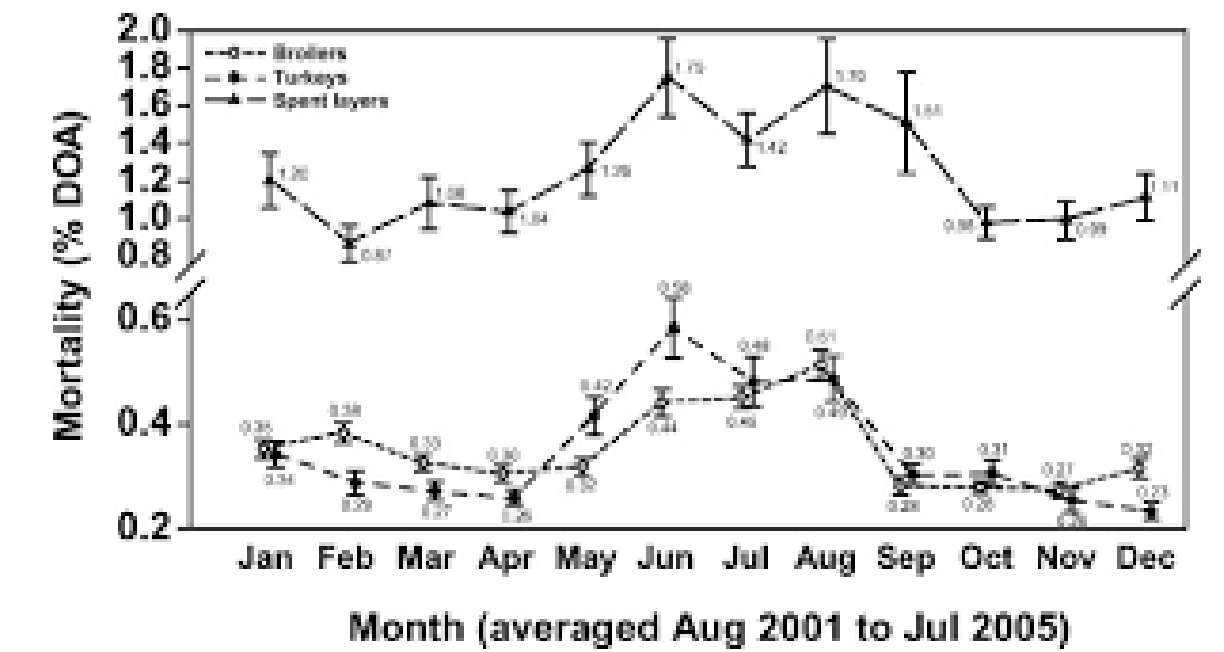
PROTOCOL FOR GENETIC SELECTION

Implement harmonised assessment methods to monitor welfare



Why?

- *To monitor welfare levels across farms in Europe*
- On farm and at slaughter- use of animal-based indicators
- At slaughter:
 - Total mortality on farm
 - Plumage Damage
 - Wounds
 - Keel bone fractures
 - Carcass condemnation





4. MINIMUM ENCLOSURE CHARACTERISTICS

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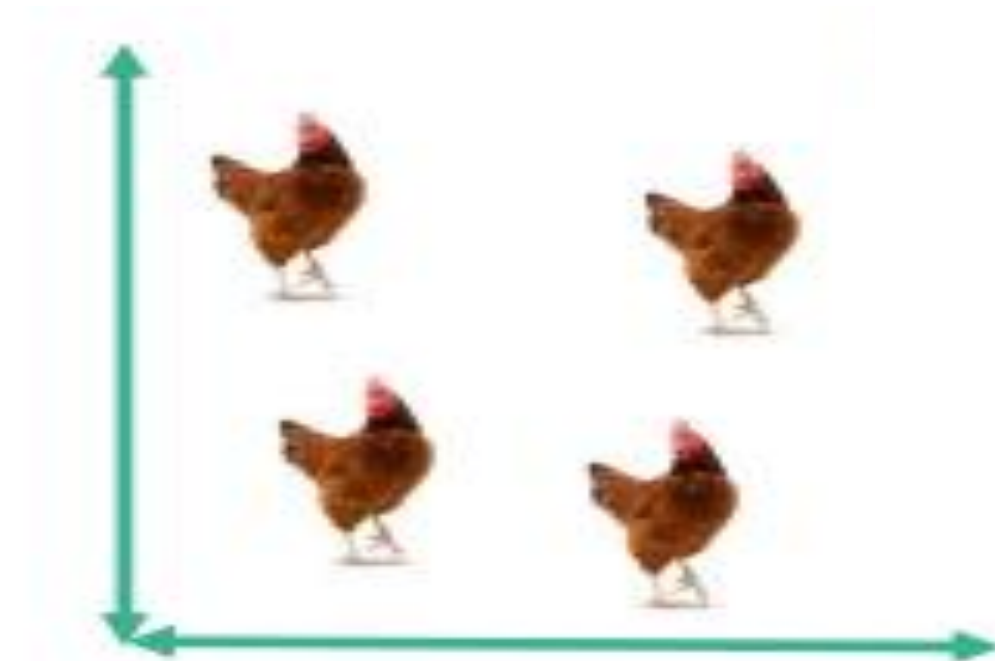
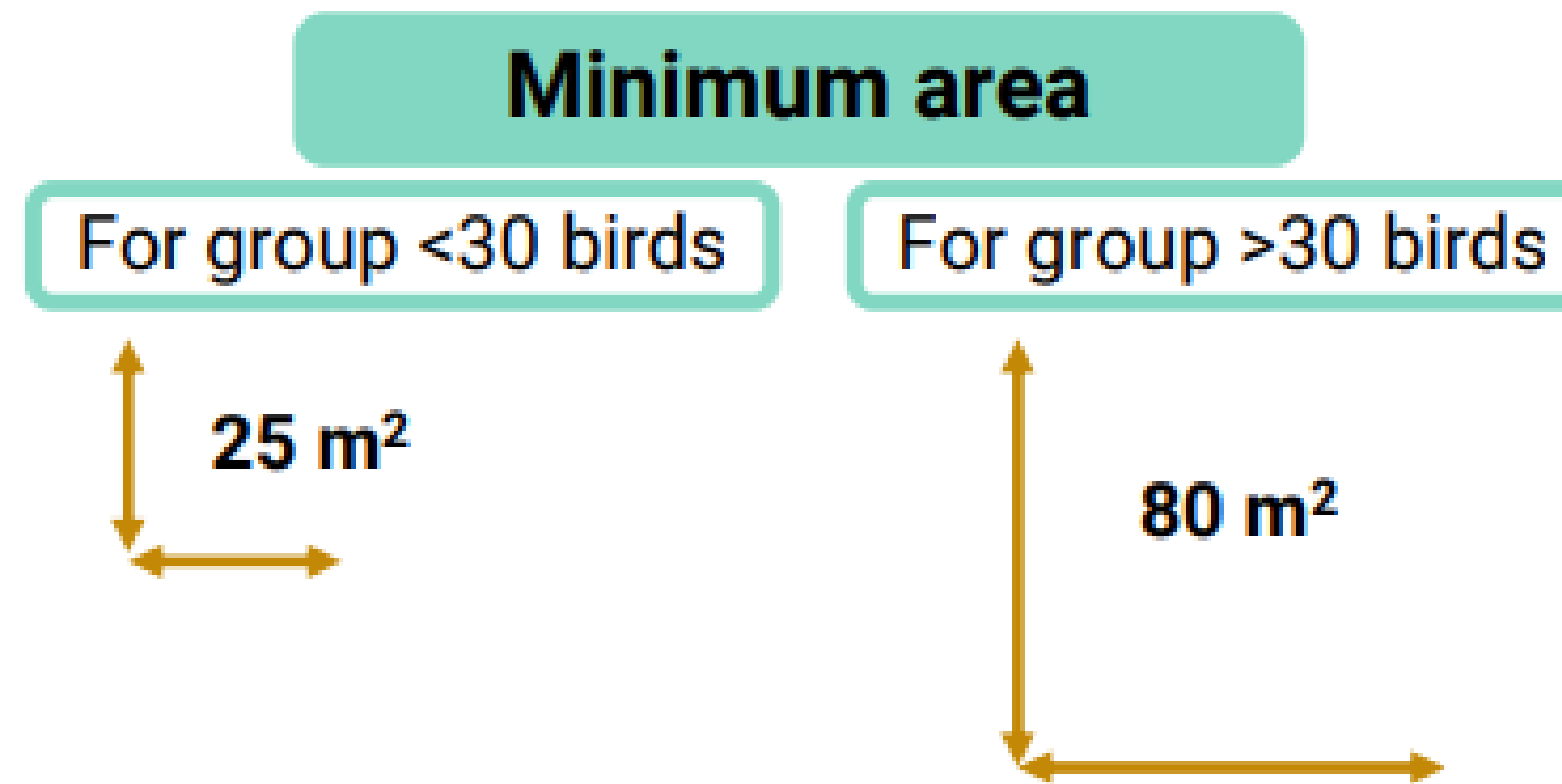


Min size of the area

- <30 birds 25 m²
- >30 birds, 80m²

Max stocking density

- 4 birds per m² for laying hens or layer breeder



MINIMUM ENCLOSURE CHARACTERISTICS



Feed and feeders

- Avoid feed restriction- feed accessible at all times
- Feed not restricted for > 10 hours pre-slaughter

Nests

- Closed nests for layer breeders & laying hens
- Soft manipulable floor
- Platforms at least 30cm wide in front of nests

Outdoor range

- Encouraged
- When provided, accessible during daylight
- 50% cover with bushes and trees



MINIMUM ENCLOSURE CHARACTERISTICS



Noise

- Noise levels should not exceed 75dB

Light

- Light from 5 lx and higher provided during day
- Natural light in addition to artificial
- 8 hours continuous darkness
- Dusk and dawn provided

Temperature

- Should be between 15°C and 26°C - laying hens and breeders
- Between 20°C and 32°C for pullets - depending on age

NH₃ - Ammonia

- Max. concentration 10ppm

Dust

- Not higher than 30mg/m³





5. BEST PRACTICE HENS PROJECT



BEST PRACTICE HENS PROJECT



- Project to help EU producers to convert from cage to non-cage systems (rearing and production)
- Provide practical guidance & support & recommendations on economic aspects
- Final meeting (Brussels) '**Best practices for alternative egg production system**' – Wed 3rd May from 09:00 to 13:30 (Ireland time)
- Free webcast event - no need to register – use this link:



<https://webcast.ec.europa.eu/best-practices-for-transitioning-to-higher-welfare-cage-free-egg-production-systems-2023-05-03>



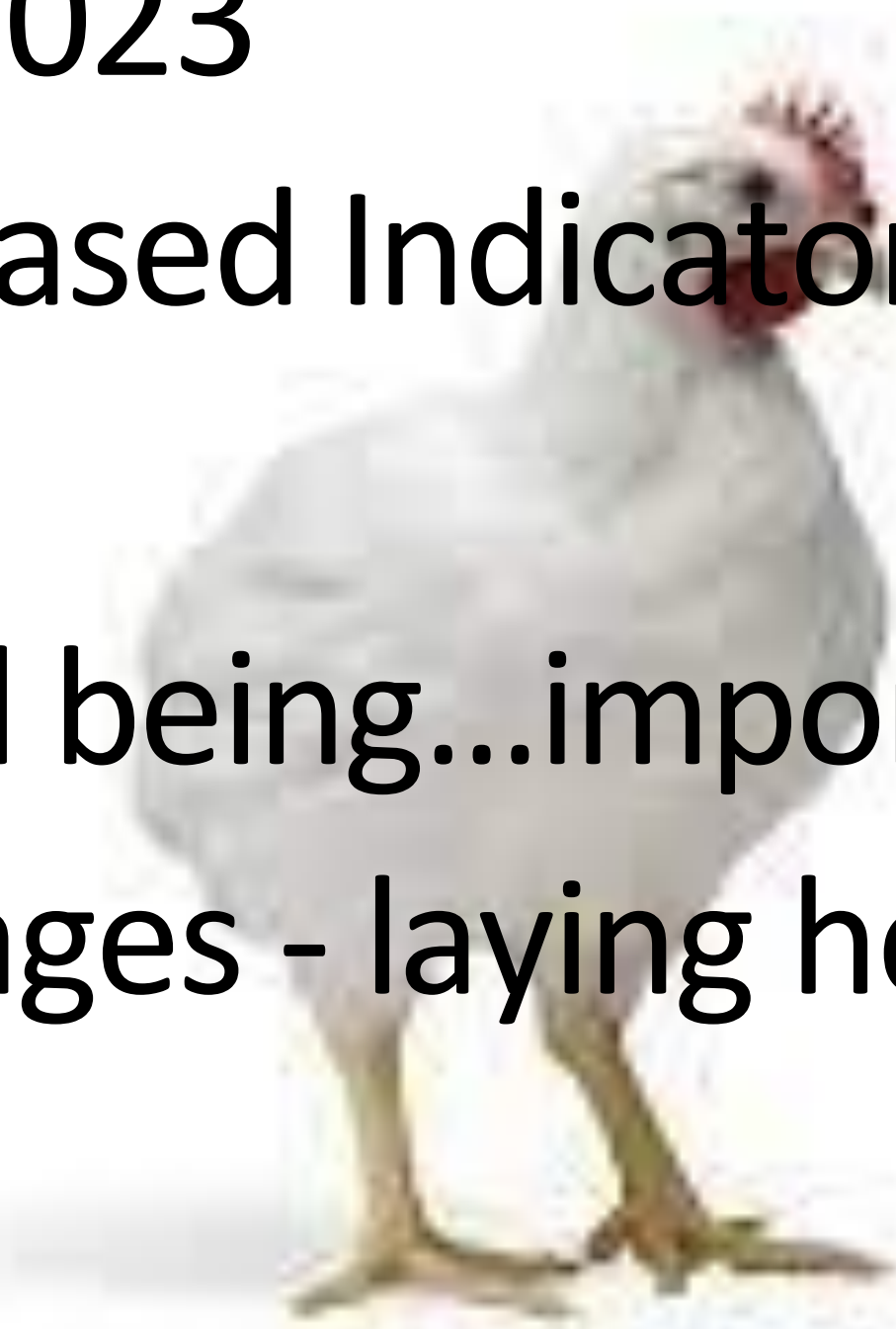
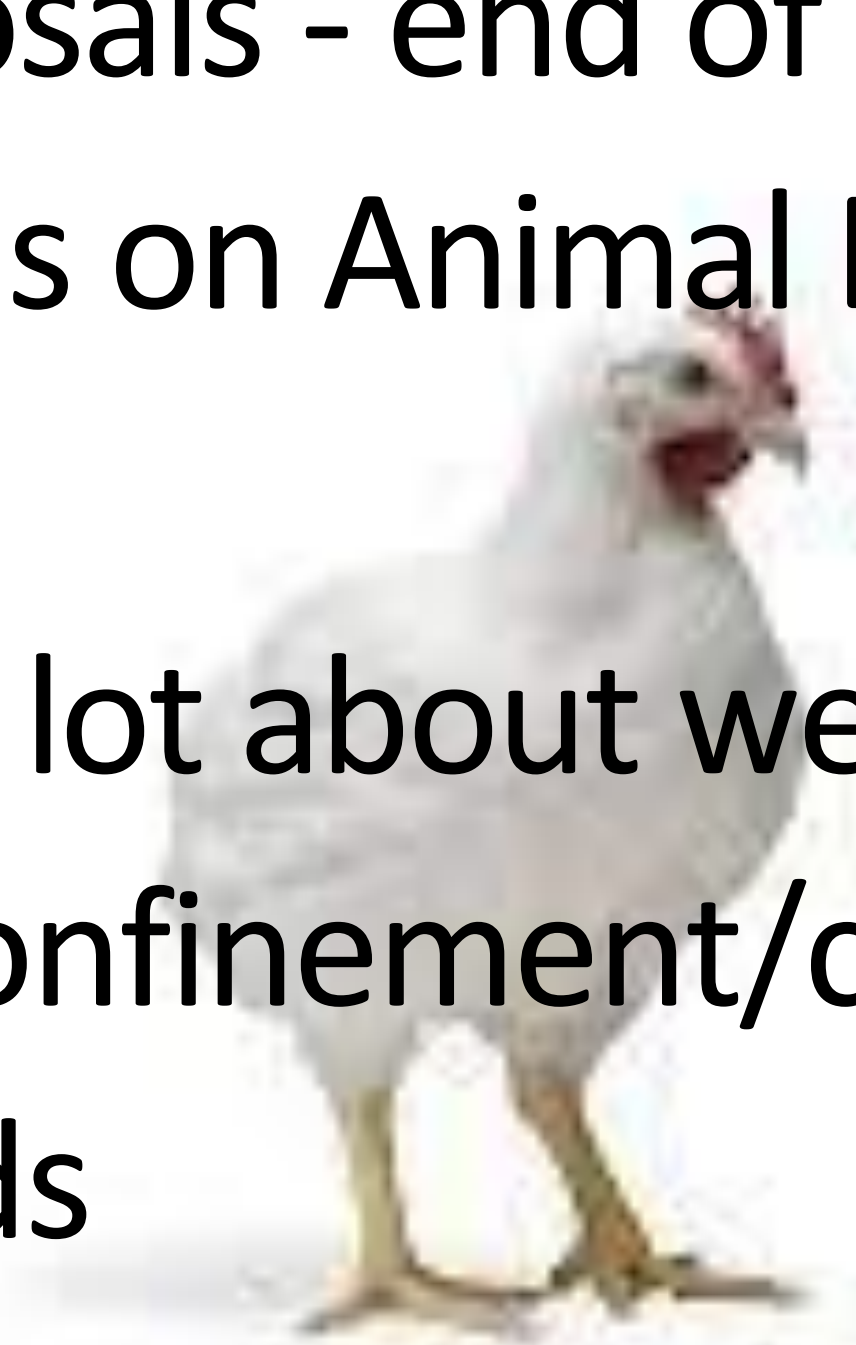
CONCLUSIONS



Key Overall Conclusions



- Legislative proposals - end of 2023
- Greater emphasis on Animal Based Indicators – both on farm and at slaughter
- Behaviour tells a lot about well being...important indicator of welfare
- Phasing out of confinement/cages - laying hens and laying breeders
- Transition periods
- Welfare label – will reward higher standards



Thank you for your attention



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Useful Website Links



<https://www.efsa.europa.eu/en/efsajournal/pub/7789>

[Best Practice Hens – Best practices for egg production in non-cage systems](#)

[FeatherWel : Working together to improve bird welfare](#)