

### **Expert Panel Addresses Hidden Camera Investigation at Ontario Egg Farm**

A panel of farm animal care experts has examined undercover video from an Ontario egg farm. The Center for Food Integrity (CFI) created the Animal Care Review Panel to engage recognized animal care specialists to examine hidden camera video investigations and provide expert perspectives for food retailers, the egg industry and the media. The panel was asked to examine video posted online on July 21 by the group Mercy For Animals.

The panel was comprised of Dr. Candace Croney, an animal ethicist at Purdue University; Dr. Mike Petrik, an Ontario-based poultry veterinarian; and Dr. Gregory Martin, an animal scientist at Penn State University. The experts viewed the video individually and provided written commentary. The panel members were given the opportunity to review each other's comments before this report was finalized.

#### **What are your thoughts on the condition of the birds shown in this video?**

Dr. Croney: Ideally, birds should be fully feathered and there shouldn't be obvious lesions or wounds. In this case, there's significant feather loss, which could suggest feather pecking, beginning of molting or both. Are these birds coming to the end of their laying cycle? At least one appears to be ill but it's hard to tell from the video, so we need to interpret cautiously.

Dr. Petrik: The birds are obviously late in their laying cycle. They are well fleshed and clean, and I see reasonably well-feathered birds in the cages that are seen as the person taking the video is walking down the alleyway.

Dr. Martin: The live birds in the video appear to be fine, with exception of the one bird with a foaming eye, which is caused by a sinus issue. That condition clears up on its own. Feather wear was appropriate for the housing type seen. Birds in different housing will show feather wear on different parts of their body.

#### **What are your thoughts on the housing conditions seen in this video?**

Dr. Martin: The housing conditions are good. The air was not dusty or that would have been picked up by the camera. The cage floors are intact and clean. The fronts of the cages were very clean and appear to be well maintained.

Dr. Petrik: Other than the one broken door that was focused on, the housing is pretty standard and appears to be well maintained.

Dr. Croney: This is an older, unenriched colony cage style. The bent bars in one shot should be looked at for maintenance issues. One clip showing a bird with her legs in between the front bars of the cage is worrisome as it looks as though that bird could be caught between those bars or escape. Given the "close-up" nature of some of the shots, it's impossible to get a good sense of how well kept up the

overall facility is. In some scenes the birds look crowded, but in others they appear to have adequate room—we can't gauge the density based on this video.

**In two shots, the head of a dead bird is blocking the path of eggs rolling down a trough.**

Dr. Martin: Birds die of natural causes, just as people. In a large production facility, as you could in a pastured flock, you will see some mortality on any given day. Sometimes a bird will die and extend the head onto the egg belt. Although rare, it can happen. Houses are to be walked daily before the eggs are collected, and any condition such as this should be resolved. So, it is extremely rare to see a bird on the belt with eggs going by. The camera operator should have acted, but chose to continue filming instead of acting on what was found. That is not showing respect for the animals by doing the right thing.

Dr. Croney: Having birds die unexpectedly unfortunately happens regardless of the housing. The issue is how long that bird was there before it was removed. Dead birds should be removed as soon as possible, preferably at least once per day.

Dr. Petrik: In a large flock (I don't know the exact size of the barn in this video but it appears to be large by Canadian standards) there will inevitably be some mortality. These birds could not have been dead very long since they were not dirty and they were not causing the eggs to pile up. It is uncommon for birds to die with body parts on the egg belt, but it can occasionally happen.

**In another shot, the camera focuses on an especially dirty egg.**

Dr. Petrik: The egg appears to have blood on it. This is uncommon, but does occasionally happen if one bird pecks at the vent of another bird when she is laying an egg or just before an egg is laid. Usually the wound is minor, and heals, but the wound will result in blood on that day's egg.

Dr. Croney: One advantage of the cage system seen in this video is that it allows the eggs to roll away and be cleaner than those laid in other systems where they remain near the birds and can be fouled. However, it's not impossible for there to be some fecal material on eggs, which will later be washed anyway during processing.

Dr. Martin: Dirty eggs, for a variety of reasons, are a very small percentage (less than two percent) of all eggs processed from egg production facilities. It is not a common occurrence in the hundreds of thousands of eggs produced each day.

**The video shows a pile of a dozen or so dead birds.**

Dr. Petrik: Dead birds are usually collected and then taken to either compost or storage to go to disposal by another method. This pile may well be from several barns, since they would all be collected to go to disposal in a common place. It is uncommon for dead birds to stay in the barn for any length of time and programs in Canada demand that the birds are disposed of daily, at a minimum.

Dr. Croney: Although it can be upsetting to see, especially without understanding why this might occur, it's not uncommon for workers removing dead birds to place them in one location for a short period of time before removal from the facility.

Dr. Martin: Common livability of birds in these conditions routinely are around 95 percent or better – around five percent die prematurely. A dozen birds need to be balanced against the population number of the flock. For example, thousands of people die in New York City every year for a variety of reasons – over 51 thousand in 2013. That is 144 people per day on average.

**Are there any other particular shots from the video you care to comment on?**

Dr. Martin: Not much of the barn was shown. No exteriors or even walking into the barn in question. So, how do we even know it came from a Canadian farm? When the bird was held up outside of the cage I hit pause and looked down the aisle of the row. The air is clear enough to see the end wall hundreds of feet away. Cage fronts looked clean as well. There are large gaps of space within the cages and birds seemed to easily move about in the cages. If I shine a bright light in your face you will avert your eyes away, just as these birds did.

Dr. Petrik: In some of the video clips, birds are excited and jumping around. This is being caused by the filming itself. It is extremely rare for birds to be this jumpy without having some novel stimulus making them active. Birds are very timid, prey animals and feel threatened by any unusual activity. Shining a bright light into the cage is definitely unusual for them.

**The video makes claims such as “They never breathe fresh air” and “They never see the sun” and “Their eyes and lungs burn.”**

Dr. Petrik: The air in the barns appears to be fresh and the birds' eyes and lungs did not appear to be burned. The bird seen with the injured eye had likely been pecked by a cage mate. Fewer birds die in this type of housing than in any other housing. Outdoor-housed birds, for example, have the worst mortality by far. It is true that movement is restricted in cages and the birds never go outside. This is the tradeoff that results in improved health and lower bird aggression. Birds with more freedom get more diseases, die at a higher rate, and have more injuries.

Dr. Martin: Much of the text is an interpretation that I do not fully agree with. Birds and the people who work with them share the same environment. So, for example, if the air is bad then it would be bad for the farmer as well.

**Based on the video, do you have any suggestions for how this farm could improve?**

Dr. Petrik: The farm needs to repair the broken door and should time the pickup of dead birds before collecting eggs. Working with nutrition and management to improve late feather cover is beneficial too. But, the feather cover on birds in this flock was not uniformly bad so I'm not sure it's a systemic problem.

Dr. Martin: Be sure to follow the guidelines of their particular animal welfare program and have third-party audits. A code of conduct and worker responsibilities (a checklist) for daily operations should be posted on the wall of the house in plain sight as a reminder. All code of conduct documents for animal care should be signed and acknowledged by all workers responsible for animal care. Most farms are doing this, and this should be confirmed on this particular farm. Farms need to properly vet all workers and review all references for proper qualifications.

Dr. Croney: I would urge the farm owner to make sure they comply with the Canadian codes of practice that outline housing conditions for hens. Some farms are phasing out this type of cage system specifically because of both animal welfare and public concerns. Regardless, these types of housing decisions should be based on current understanding of best practice relative to hen well-being, the ability of the farm to manage the system well, and the sustainability of their practices, which include ethical considerations.

## **Conclusions**

Dr. Martin: Birds that are housed in cages are protected from disease and peer pressure. When properly-trained caretakers are working in these houses, birds will thrive without threat of predators or weather that could harm them.

Dr. Croney: Some aspects shown are concerning, such as the physical condition of the birds and the maintenance of a couple of the cage areas. Again, these cannot be judged without a better view of the entire operation and an understanding of the stage of production of the hens. Further, unlike other videos where poor or rough handling have been shown, there isn't any evidence of mistreatment by caretakers. What is clear is that housing hens in cages that do not afford them the opportunity to engage in most normal behaviors of importance to them, such as scratching or nesting, raises valid ethical and welfare questions that should be carefully considered.

Dr. Petrik: Videos like these tend to show the worst situations. This video does not represent the day-to-day operation of this type of farm. The birds in this particular barn are all the same age – they are all old. A parallel might be to take video at a retirement home and criticize a city for how frail and sickly their citizens are. This video gives no context to what the barn is actually like in general and is not representative of the barns I work in across the province on a daily basis.

An analogy I have used before is to take all the clips of batters hit by pitches, hard slides and collisions at the plate you can collect from a baseball season, put them together in a 90-second montage and try to convince people who have never seen the game of baseball that it is a violent and dangerous sport.

## **Animal Care Review Panel**

Hidden camera investigations have heightened public attention on animal care issues. In an effort to foster a more balanced conversation and to provide credible feedback to promote continuous

improvement in farm animal care, CFI created the Animal Care Review Panel. The Panel operates independently. Its reviews, assessments, recommendations and reports will not be submitted to the egg industry for review or approval. CFI's only role is to facilitate the review process and release the panel's findings.

### **About the Experts**

#### **Dr. Candace Croney, Purdue University**

Dr. Croney is a renowned expert in applied animal behavior, with an emphasis on animal learning, welfare and ethics. She is an associate professor of animal sciences at Purdue University. She has contributed to nationwide animal welfare efforts working with organizations such as the American Zoo and Aquarium Association and many others. She is on the Scientific Advisory Committee of the American Humane Certified program, and her research on farm animal cognition has been featured in national and international broadcast programs.

#### **Dr. Mike Petrik, DVM**

Dr. Petrik began his career working with mixed large animals but has specialized in egg-laying hens since 2000. He graduated from the Ontario Veterinary College in 1998. In 2014, he received his Master of Science in Animal Welfare from the University of Guelph. Dr. Petrik has worked on the scientific committee for the Canadian laying hens Codes of Practice, which are currently being updated. He has an appreciation for the day-to-day care of birds, having grown up on a poultry farm with laying hens and broiler chickens. He has a blog entitled, "Mike, the Chicken Vet."

#### **Dr. Gregory P. Martin, Penn State University**

Dr. Martin is an extension poultry educator for Penn State University Extension. After several years of poultry industry and teaching experience, he returned to Texas A&M University to earn a Ph.D. in Poultry Science. He is registered as a Professional Animal Scientist (PAS) in three separate subject classifications from the American Registry of Professional Animal Scientists (ARPAS) & PACCO. This includes certification as a poultry welfare auditor. Dr. Martin holds active membership in several academic, agricultural and scientific organizations.

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