

# Last modified cage system in

**Just before the law passed the German parliament, Detlev Bielenberg got permission to install a new layer house with a system that is accepted in the EU but not in Germany. What drives a young entrepreneur to invest in something that soon will be forbidden?**

By Wiebe van der Sluis

As of 2007 the conventional layer cage system will be banned in Germany, five years earlier than in the rest of the European Union. The discussion about animal welfare has created emotional conflicts between egg producers and poultry industry leaders on one side and animal welfare lobbyists and politicians on the other. They both agree that the housing conditions of caged laying hens can be improved. They disagree on the manner of improving it and the technical solutions. A bold ban on cages is not seen as an acceptable solution.

The cage system was originally designed to improve food safety and bird health. These positive traits cannot be ignored and discarded. It is for that reason that many cage manufacturers have been looking at solutions within the cage concept that would meet the desired improvements in bird welfare. They came up with modified cages, which have perches, nests, a facility for dust-bathing and extra floor and feeder space. The systems feature improved bird welfare and good bird health and provide a relatively relaxed workload for the flock manager. Eggs collected from these systems prove to be of good external and internal quality.

## Small group housing

The positive features of the modified or furnished cages system attracted Detlev Bielenberg from Schnakenbek, near Hamburg in Germany to invest in this. He

made that decision with the knowledge that the system could be in use for a limited time, because the discussions about whether modified cages should be accepted or not was not concluded at that time in Germany. The law created and strongly defended by the Green Party Minister of Agriculture and Consumer Affairs, Renate Künast, was clear: those systems would not be accepted either, as written down in the law. However there was hope that the law would be changed since there was clear evidence that these modified or also called colony or small group systems would meet all the required criteria for bird welfare and would even carry some advantages over free range systems.

Discussions still go on, but Minister Künast is not planning to change her mind and is sticking to her plan to a ban of all kinds cage systems with a lesser internal height of one meter.

Meanwhile Meller Batterien has installed the "Euro 2000" layer cage system for small group housing at Detlev Bielenberg's farm. Since Bielenberg got permission to install the system before the law came into effect he can make use



*White and brown layers kept together in small groups.*

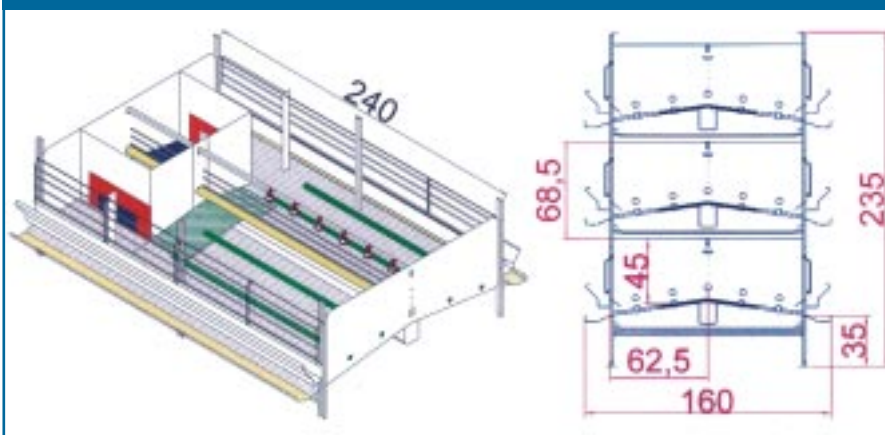
of it until the year 2012, at which time the modified cages will be banned in Germany as well.

## Feed to play with

The new installation fills one of the two layer houses at this mixed, poultry and 210 ha crop farm. The old house contains Hellman cages in which he originally kept 35,000 layers: half white and half brown. But since the year 2002 he keeps 28,000 hens in it because he had to take out one bird per cage, from 5 to 4, to meet the then required 550 cm<sup>2</sup> per bird floor space.

The new house for 47,880 birds has six 72-meter long rows of seven tier high structures, with a service floor at the top of the third tier. Each tier contains 28.5 compartments of 240 x 125 cm, providing space for 40 hens each (see Figure). These compartments can also be divided in the middle by wires to provide room for two groups of 20 hens. Each hen has access to 12 cm trough space and 15 cm perch per hen. The egg protection plate, which is placed in front of the trough, has an abrasive steel plate to trim the nails of the hens. Birds have access to a nest as well as a mat for scratching and dust

**Figure: The typical design of the Euro 2000 group housing system for layers**



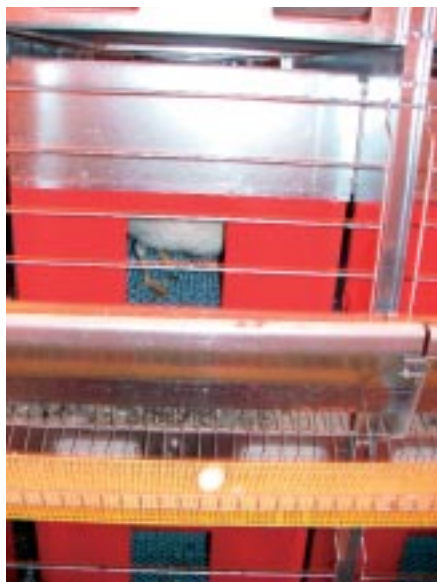
# Germany installed by Bielenberg



*A service floor separates the third and fourth tier.*



*Inside the section there are perches, a nest and an Astroturf mat.*



*The nest has an opening at the front and allows access to more than one bird.*



*The new house has been erected next to the old house with a connection for the egg conveyor in between.*

bathing. The mat is made of Astroturf and is 1,500 cm<sup>2</sup>. These mats are usually automatically topped with sand or saw dust, but not in Bielenberg's farm. He prefers to provide a little bit of feed on the mat, which stimulates the birds to do what their natural behaviour tells them

to do, scratching for feed. Experience so far has shown that this practice does not cause an increase in feed efficiency or waste.

## **Direct consumer contact**

Bielenberg is rather optimistic about the future use of his new small group housing system. The efficiency is good and the quality of the eggs he gets are to the satisfaction of his clients. The majority of the eggs are sold to a packing station (Heidegold), while he also sells to restaurants and bakeries. Once a week he sells eggs directly to consumers. He then takes the van and goes to the market in Hamburg. This contact with the consumer tells him a lot about how they think about the welfare of laying hens.

If you are honest and tell them the right story, they understand the issue better and most of the consumers have less opposition to battery cages than animal welfare activists wants us to believe, Bielenberg says. ■

## Europe slowly embraces alternatives

Chickens are scavenging birds. They cannot fly over long distances and usually prefer to stay near their nest and find feed. Since domestication, all kinds of systems have been designed to provide egg layers a comfortable place. Commercialisation of the egg business initiated the development of larger systems, whereby some forty years ago for bird health and welfare reasons cages were designed. Over the years this housing system has been fine-tuned to become the most efficient system to produce high quality and safe to eat table eggs. Bird welfare was easily overlooked in the drive to maximize egg output. In some parts of the world peo-

ple care about this and want the poultry industry to change the way they house their birds.

According to figures released by Jansen Poultry Equipment at EuroTier last year, the cage system is the standard for commercial egg production all over the world. Only in western societies have alternative systems have taken a share. In Latin America, Africa, Asia and the CIS countries (almost) 100% of the eggs are produced in cages. In the USA it is still 99% but slowly decreasing to favour a niche market. Europe in this respect is, according to the Jansen figures, an exception with, despite a future ban, some 90% of the layers kept

in cages. This 90% is an overall average, but when looking at specific countries the picture is completely different. The ten new member states still use cages but the old members have adapted alternative systems at different levels: Take for example France and Germany - they still have more than 80% of their birds in cages. The United Kingdom has more than 70% in cages, while the Netherlands (49%), Austria (60%) and Sweden (80%) have more than half of their layer population in alternative forms of housing, such as aviary and free range.