

Egg fight calls for free-range honesty

By LOUISE PREECE

VESNA Luketic's chickens peck happily in the green pasture on her free-range egg farm; drinking, sleeping and eating when they please.

The Myrniong farmer is deeply passionate about farming ethically and producing a quality egg that keeps her customers coming back for more.

It is a value, she says, that not everyone shares and with the lack of current legislation in place to guarantee that customers are getting what they pay for when they purchase free-range eggs, some egg producers are taking advantage of the situation.

With no current legal definition of "free-range", Vesna and others in the industry believe that a number of egg production companies are intensively producing eggs, yet claiming they are free-range and while they are at it, claiming the profits too.

"It is perfectly legal, however, they are misleading the customer who believes that the eggs they are purchasing are produced under genuine free range conditions,"

to eliminate bacteria and disease, as well as giving Vesna and her husband Ivan time to re-sow the paddocks with oats or barley for fodder.

Eggs are collected daily and sold to Coles supermarkets, Victoria wide, as well as 30 other outlets, including restaurants, delis, fruit shops and supermarkets.

Vesna and her husband have managed a hobby farm for over 20 years, but it wasn't until 10 years ago that they decided to establish a commercial operation.

"I wanted my family all together, because Ivan travelled so much working on building contracts all over Australia," said Vesna.

"We always had chickens and people loved our eggs, so it was a natural thing to start a free-range farm."

With a humble beginning of 80 brown birds, demand quickly increased and in 2003 Vesna began supplying 10 Coles supermarkets and now supplies throughout Victoria.

"It's so difficult to compete on the market with eggs sold as free-range that are produced under inten-

range eggs has jumped dramatically in the past five years and the Australian Bureau of Statistics released an analysis of data in 2006 proving that farmers were incapable of producing the 364.8 million free-range eggs consumed each year (15 per cent of the egg market).

Vesna has lobbied with the FRFA for several years trying to change legislation and educate the public about the situation.

"The legal definition of free-range egg production must be land based x amount of birds per acre not 40,000 to 120,000 birds on ten acres," she said.

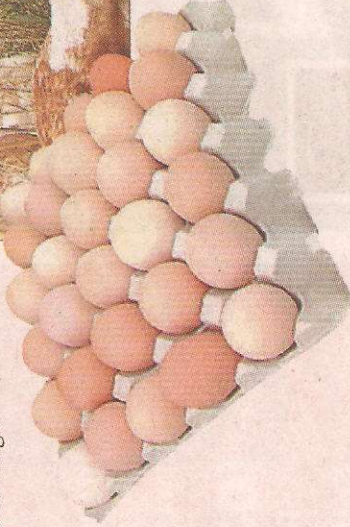
Dianne Moore, secretary of FRFA, said the core of the problem stems from the fact there is nothing in legislation to say companies can't produce eggs intensively and sell them as free-range.

"It is unfair to authentic free-range farmers that are putting in the work and getting nothing out of it, and it is unfair to the customer who is getting ripped off," she said.

Ivy Inwood, president of the Free Range Egg and Poultry Association (FREPA) said it is a truth in

"This year we will have a national meeting of the free-range industry to hopefully find some cohesion among growers and agree upon a fair set of standards that the free-range industry will be governed upon," she said.

"It is a very disappointing situation when the demand is there and the public are buying eggs they think are genuinely free-range."



NOT ALL IT'S CRACKED UP TO BE: Myrniong farmer Vesna Luketic (above right) is lobbying for a legal definition of 'free-range' to eliminate intensively produced eggs being sold to the public as free-range.

GOLDEN EGGS: Freshly laid eggs (above).



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