

'A loud and clear message': California passes historic farm animal protections

The Guardian, Thu 8 Nov 2018

It was a big night for California chickens, cows, and pigs as midterm voters overwhelmingly supported an initiative codifying the most progressive animal welfare protections in the world. California Proposition 12, which passed with more than 61% of the vote, sets specific space requirements for confined animals raised for food.



“California voters have sent a loud and clear message that they reject cruel cage confinement in the meat and egg industries,” Kitty Block, CEO of the Humane Society of the United States, wrote in a statement after the election results were announced. “Thanks to the dedication of thousands of volunteers and coalition partners who made this victory happen, millions of veal calves, mother pigs and egg-laying hens will never know the misery of being locked in a tiny cage for the duration of their lives.”

The Humane Society was one of several animal rights organizations that backed the ballot, collectively financing more than \$13m in support.

They came up against other animal activists from People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals (Peta), the Humane Farming Association and the Friends of Animals, however, who criticized the move for not going far enough. The Association of California Egg Farmers and the National Pork Producers Council were also in opposition, emphasizing that the new rules would cause food prices to spike.

Beginning in 2020, the law will require that veal sold in the state comes only from calves who have more than 43 sq ft of space, and hens (including chickens, turkeys, ducks, geese and guinea fowl) will have to have at least one sq ft. Two years later, in 2022, the law will expand to include breeding pigs and their babies, banning the sale of pork unless it comes from pigs given at least 24 sq ft of space, and will require all eggs sold to come from “cage-free” hens, defined by the United Egg Producers’ guidelines.

The impact of this initiative is expected to stretch beyond the state, as the new rules affect products sold in California, regardless of where animals were raised. It’s a momentous move poised to create better conditions animals – but it could come at a cost to consumers.

“Everyone agrees farm animals should be treated with care,” the California Farm Bureau Federation president, Jamie Johansson, wrote ahead of the vote. “California egg farmers who have managed to stay in business comply with those rules. All Proposition 12 does is allow predatory lawsuits against egg farmers, who provide some of the healthiest food on the planet. Proposition 12 would push egg prices higher in the state that already suffers from the nation’s highest poverty rate.”

Most of the financial focus has been on how this could affect egg producers in an industry that is trying to balance delivering on increasing demand for cage-free eggs, while catering to low-income consumers who rely on cheaper food. According to a US Department of Agriculture report from 2016, only 10% of the nation’s eggs come from cage-free hens and a shift could cost billions of dollars to the industry. In California’s billion-dollar egg industry, only a third of laying hens are currently uncaged.

Still, voters voiced resounding support for the new restrictions, which are currently the most progressive farm animal rights provisions in the world. Big retailers are already on board, and Walmart, Target and Whole Foods have plans in place to sell only cage free by 2025.

“The passage of Proposition 12 is ground-breaking for the welfare of animals and has raised the bar at an important time in our consideration of what farm to table means in this country,” said the Humane Society’s Sara Amundson in a statement. “Californians have resoundingly voted to acknowledge that further expanding the humane treatment of animals matters in our society and we applaud them.”