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Shocking conditions uncovered at a huge Kent egg farm as company looks to new larger development.

Secret footage taken during a visit to one of the largest UK egg operations by local animal protection group Animal Aid, revealed serious cause for concern over the conditions in which the hens are kept. Fridays Ltd are currently planning to build an even larger production facility just outside of Maidstone. This could see upwards of 190,000 hens kept in similar conditions.

The hens are being housed in 'high-rise' staging tiered sheds to keep up with surging demand for 'free-range' eggs. Combwell Farm produces around a million eggs weekly to sell to the free-range market¹.

Critics have attacked scheme as equivalent of 'high-rise urban living for hens'² and some questioned whether these eggs produced in this way should be labelled as free-range.

Upon entering the shed, investigators described being hit by the strong stench of ammonia in the heavy, dusty and stifling air. Combined with the noise of thousands of hens, investigators described the conditions as 'absolutely overwhelming and oppressive'.

Inside the shed they witnessed the following:

- Several dead and decomposing hens left lying among living hens.
- One hen was so badly decomposed and caked in faeces, that at first it wasn't apparent that she had once been a living hen.
- Beak-trimmed hens.
- Hens who were entirely bald across large sections of their body, some with sores.
- The tiered raised perch area appeared to be very crowded.
- Flooring and metal staging caked in muck and a thick layer of dust over fixtures.

With conditions such as these, the group question what chance there will be for the health and welfare of hens to be guaranteed at an even larger facility.

During the day, the investigators saw relatively few birds outside on the range outside of the shed, considering that the set up apparently holds around 64,000 birds.

Five years ago, local residents and Animal Aid successfully fought off Fridays' previous plans that were around a third the size of this new proposal. They are once again looking to take on the new plans once the application is live.

Says Animal Aid Campaign Manager Tor Bailey:

'This is intensive farming in a different guise, with the chickens living in incredibly cramped conditions with limited access to the outside. On our visit the weather was not too adverse but there were very few hens out on the range, compared to the many thousands who remained inside.'

'Animal Aid feels that people need to see what happens in the vast crowded sheds that are conveniently located largely out of sight and therefore out of mind for most people and question whether this is really a progressive, animal friendly solution....or it's just green-washing of an inherently cruel industry?'

'Consumers often want to choose a kinder option, and many are willing to pay more for better animal welfare. If they witnessed scenes such as these, they may feel actively misled and horrified. We would encourage all who feel moved by this investigation to consider a vegan diet, as this is the only way they can be that sure their food is cruelty-free, healthy and better for the environment.'

Notes for Editors

- Further information and images from the investigation are available on the Animal Aid website <https://www.animalaid.org.uk/fridays-egg-farm>
- Report on the new plans in local news: <https://www.kentonline.co.uk/kent-business/county-news/massive-free-range-egg-farm-proposed-234303/>
- This investigation happened prior to the most recent lockdown.
- Animal Aid investigators observe strict biosecurity at all times. We have consulted a senior Trading Standards Officer to ensure that we adopt all necessary measures and that we are always in full compliance.
- Additional supporting information about farmed chickens is available at:
 - <https://www.animalaid.org.uk/the-issues/our-campaigns/animal-farming/suffering-farmed-chickens/>
 - <https://www.animalaid.org.uk/british-egg-week-public-dark-suffering-hens/>

For more information or to request an interview, please contact Tor Bailey, Campaign Manager, by email: tor.b@animalaid.co.uk

References

1. https://www.farminguk.com/news/egg-producer-looks-to-build-8m-free-range-farm_56603.html
2. <https://www.fwi.co.uk/livestock/poultry/eggs/free-range-egg-packer-launches-no-multi-tier-campaign>