

The Keeping of Laying Hens in Switzerland

Swiss poultry farmers keep approximately 2.5 million laying and breeding hens. This is sufficient to cover only half of the Swiss consumer demand for shell eggs and egg products. This low level of self-sufficiency is a result of market legislation rather than any animal welfare initiatives.

The Swiss Order on the Egg Market and the Supply of Eggs states that domestic production of shell eggs cannot exceed 65% of the average consumption in the last two years.

The fall in the number of laying hens during the '80s was due primarily to new legislation on the protection of lakes and rivers and an order concerning maximum livestock numbers which forced many commercial keepers of laying hens to massively reduce the size of their flocks. Finally, the decline in the consumption of shell eggs is not a specifically Swiss phenomenon but has been observed in most industrial countries.

In the past few years, there has been a massive increase in imports of egg products. These are used mainly by the pasta industry and large-scale bakers. In 1984, the equivalent of 288 million eggs were imported as egg products, while in 1992, this figure had increased to 411 million. By contrast, and in the same period, imports of shell eggs fell from 399 to 342 million units.

Whereas industrial and trade users of eggs are increasingly switching to cheap imports, consumers remain loyal to home-produced shell eggs despite the enormous price difference in relation to imported eggs.

Apart from the traditional preference for home-produced goods, the many years of intensive public education by the animal protection organizations has helped to increase consumer awareness and create a corresponding demand and an acceptance of higher prices for home-produced eggs.

In addition, and in 1992, the Swiss producers' organizations joined together in the "Swiss Egg Campaign." Since then they have skillfully used "appropriate husbandry" as a sales promotion tool in jointly financed information and publicity campaigns.

In comparison with other countries, the keeping of laying hens in Switzerland is characterized by a predominance of small and medium-sized units. In 1992, the keeping of laying hens generated an income for the farmers of 232 million francs. This corresponds to roughly 2.5% of the final gross income of Swiss agriculture.

The egg market in Switzerland is protected by few barriers against foreign competition. Under the Swiss Egg Order (EVO) The importation of eggs into Switzerland is liberalized. The EVO requires egg importers to buy only 40 "domestic quota eggs from protected undertakings at a price fixed by the authorities which is sufficient to cover the costs of production" for every 100 imported shell eggs.

In 1992, the fixed price to the producer for one egg was 39.94 centimes. In 1991, imported eggs (85% of which come from the Netherlands, Germany and France) entered Switzerland at an average price of 9.9 centimes per egg. The Swiss government charges a levy of approximately 2 centimes on each imported egg. This money goes into the "egg price compensation fund" which is used to promote the sale of Swiss-produced eggs.

The "grey egg market" which is not covered under government price and sales guarantees, is of much greater economic importance than the "quota egg market." Approximately, two-thirds of domestic production is supplied to this free market where it

competes equally with foreign produced eggs. Swiss producers generally receive two to three centimes per “grey egg” lower than the price for quota eggs.