Foreword

Layer hen welfare

There are ongoing concerns about the welfare of the animals that society uses. Farm animal welfare, and particularly laying hen welfare, is a contemporary issue for the public, consumers, policy-makers, stakeholders in the supply chain and others. Animal welfare science has a critical role in understanding the impact of human management and custodianship of these animals. Australian researchers with a wide discipline interest and expertise in poultry science were commissioned by Australian Eggs, a member-owned not-for-profit company that, in collaboration with the Australian Government, invests in RD&E programs to undertake a comprehensive independent review of the scientific literature on layer hen welfare. The objective of these reviews was to inform both current welfare discussions and future investment in poultry welfare research and development in Australia.

Nineteen review papers from this original commissioned exercise have been recently updated, revised and published in this special issue of *Animal Production Science* on layer hen welfare. These reviews cover: examination of the welfare implications of the main production systems; development, growth and production; husbandry and hen behaviour; and health. The reviewers reflected on the context of egg production in Australia since a considerable amount of the research on laying hen welfare has been and continues to be conducted internationally, and thus is most relevant to conditions and production systems that may not align well with the strains, housing systems, disease risks, and climatic conditions experienced within Australia. Specifically, in Australia, there are predominantly brown strains of laying hens, free-range systems are highly prevalent, specific disease risks differ and environmental conditions may be extreme, particularly the high temperatures.

These review papers reflect the current state of knowledge of laying hen welfare as applied to Australian production systems.

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