ANIMAL POLICY INTERNATIONAL

CLOSING THE WELFARE GAP ON **IMPORTED EGGS**

Bringing all imported eggs in line with European Union standards

OCTOBER 2026

Published by:

Animal Policy International
www.animalpolicyinternational.org
info@animalpolicyinternational.org

ANIMAL POLICY INTERNATIONAL

Brussels, October 2026

Introduction

The European Commission is preparing a proposal to phase out the remaining use of cages for laying hens in the EU. It has indicated that the proposal, expected by the end of 2026, will include equivalent requirements for imported products.

This proposal would complete the transition that began with the prohibition of barren battery cages. Agreed in 1999, that prohibition took full effect in 2012 after a twelve-year transition period. Enriched cages remained permitted with a legal minimum of 750 square centimetres per hen, about 20% more than the area of a sheet of A4 paper. The new proposal is intended to phase out these remaining cage systems.

The Commission's position on imports has developed over several years. In its 2021 response to the End the Cage Age European Citizens' Initiative, it said that it would consider equivalent rules or standards for imported products, or a labelling requirement. The 2025 *Vision for Agriculture and Food* stated that future animal welfare proposals would apply the same standards to products produced in the EU and those imported from third countries. In 2026, the Livestock Strategy included equivalent import requirements among the planned elements of the laying hen proposal.

The Livestock Strategy states that high standards for EU producers must be matched by "reciprocal requirements for imported products with adequate enforcement tools". It gives two reasons: EU farmers should not be disadvantaged by competing with production subject to lower standards, and EU citizens expect products sold in the EU to meet high welfare standards.[1]

This report outlines which products the import requirement should cover if it is to support fair competition for EU farmers, and ensure that imported products are not derived from hens kept in cages.

This report is structured as follows:

- **Section 2 (Breaking down the EU's egg-import requirement: Policy context)** examines the Commission's policy commitments in the *Vision for Agriculture and Food* and *Livestock Strategy*, alongside established EU precedents for conditioning market access on production practices in third countries
- **Section 3 (Scope of the requirement: Eggs and egg products)** illustrates the market scale of trade in eggs and egg products, the number of caged hens associated, and the estimated cost to consumers of a fully-scoped import requirement.
- **Section 4 (Legal design of the import requirement)** considers why the import requirement should be included in the revised laying-hen legislation rather than left to trade agreements or labelling, and examines how the products covered affect its justification under WTO rules.
- **Section 5 (Recommendations and conclusion)** sets out the report's recommendations alongside proposed legal drafting.
- **Section 6 (Appendices)**

Executive summary

By the end of 2026, the European Commission is due to propose a phase-out of cages for egg-laying hens in the EU together with equivalent requirements for imported eggs. The Commission has stated that the measure's intended outcomes are to improve animal welfare, maintain fair conditions for EU farmers, and meet EU citizens' expectations for higher welfare standards.

Achieving these objectives will depend in part on how the import requirement is designed.

Two choices will be particularly important. First, the requirement should be established in EU legislation, so that it applies consistently to imports from all third countries. Second, it must cover eggs in all forms in which they are traded, including shell eggs and egg products (e.g., liquid and dried eggs).

This report examines how the import requirement should be designed and scoped for the Commission's commitment to be met: that eggs sold in the EU, whatever their origin, come from hens kept to the standards the EU sets for its own producers.

8x

increase in the value of EU egg imports in the last five years

~90%

of current egg imports come from hens kept in cages

~1 in 4

caged hens kept abroad supply the EU market with egg products

Key findings

Egg imports are rapidly increasing. The value of EU imports of eggs and egg products has surged eightfold in the last five years. Import volumes in the first half of 2026 were 86% higher than in the first half of 2025. **Around 90% of imports come from hens kept in cages, compared to less than a third for EU production.**

Legislation provides the basis for a consistent import requirement. Placing the requirement in the revised laying-hen legislation would establish a common market-access condition for imports from all third countries. Trade agreements and labelling can support this approach, but neither would achieve the same coverage in the absence of an EU-wide legislative requirement.

A requirement that only covers shell eggs would leave a substantial gap. Almost a quarter (24.4%) of the caged hens kept abroad to supply the EU market, approximately 2.3 million birds, produce eggs that enter the EU as liquid or dried products. These eggs are broken before export and used in products like bakery goods, confectionery, sauces, and ready meals.

Existing import controls provide a route for enforcement. The EU already has separate official certificates for imports of eggs and egg products. These certificates currently cover animal-health and food-safety requirements, but they could be extended to include confirmation of the housing conditions of hens.

The estimated cost to consumers is expected to be limited. Modelling puts the whole import requirement at €0.21 per person per year, with the inclusion of egg products making up only €0.06 of that figure.

Setting the import requirement in EU legislation: Model legal text

The report recommends placing the import requirement in the revised laying hen legislation, supported by an independent legal view from Baldon Avocats, a Paris-based law firm.

The following text illustrates how this could be reflected in the proposal:

Article X: Requirements for imported eggs and egg products

1. This Article applies to eggs and egg products obtained from laying hens and falling within CN headings ex **0407**, ex **0408**, and ex **3502**.
2. The products referred to in paragraph 1 may be brought into the Union for the purpose of being placed on the Union market only if they have been obtained from laying hens kept in housing systems that comply with any of the following requirements:
3. the requirements contained in Chapter [X] of this Regulation/Directive; or.
4. requirements recognised by the Union to be equivalent to those set out by Chapter [X] of this Regulation/Directive.
5. Consignments of products referred to in paragraph 2 originating from third countries shall be accompanied by an official certificate issued by the competent authority of the exporting country attesting compliance with the requirements specified in paragraph 2.
6. The Commission is empowered, by means of implementing acts, to establish a procedure for the recognition by the Union of equivalent conditions under paragraph 2, point (b).
7. Specific requirements on the official certificates referred in paragraph 3 are to be laid down by the Commission, by means of implementing acts, in accordance with Article 90 of Regulation (EU) 2017/625.

Placing this clause in the revised laying hen legislation would ensure the Commission fulfils its commitments in the *Vision for Agriculture and Food* and *Livestock Strategy*, protecting competitive reciprocity for domestic producers, and ensuring that there is a consistent, WTO-compliant standard across the Single Market.

Recommendations

01 Establish a binding import requirement in the revised laying hen legislation, applying to imports from all third countries

02 Explicitly cover shell eggs and egg products, identifying the relevant custom classifications.

03 Consider using the existing official certification framework for eggs and egg products to verify compliance with the prohibition on cage housing.

Contents

Introduction **i**

Executive Summary **ii**

Contents **1**

1. Breaking down the EU's egg-import requirement: Policy context **2**

Existing EU precedents for import requirements 4

2. Scope of the requirement: Eggs and egg products **6**

How EU legislation distinguishes eggs from egg products 7

The effect of limiting the requirement to shell eggs 8

How accession could change the sources of EU egg imports over time 10

Estimated consumer cost of full scope 11

3. Legal design of the import requirement **12**

The role of trade agreements and labelling 13

Product scope and WTO considerations 14

4. Recommendations and conclusion **16**

5. Appendices **18**

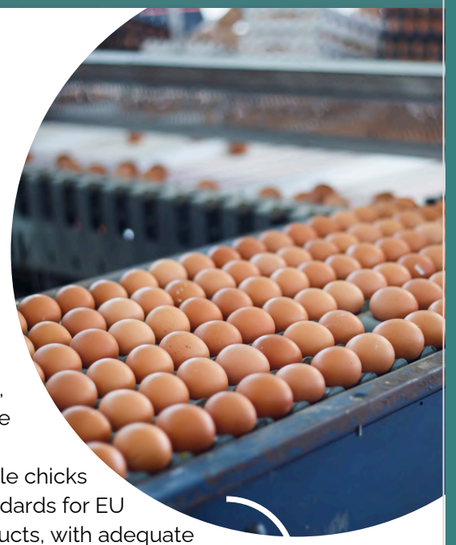
6. References **22**

To access the full data behind this report, **scan the QR code** or go to **animalpolicyinternational .org/eu-eggs-data**

1

Breaking down the EU's egg import requirement: Policy context

The import requirement examined in this report derives from the European Commission's own policy objectives. This section examines the policy context and rationale behind them.



In February 2025, the Commission's *Vision for Agriculture and Food* stated that future animal welfare proposals would apply the same standards to products in the EU and imported from third countries, while addressing enforcement and citizens' concerns.[2]

In July 2026, the Commission's Livestock Strategy carried that commitment into the laying hen file. It records that "[b]y the end of 2026, the Commission intends to propose a targeted revision of animal welfare rules for laying hens and broilers, focusing on the phasing-out of cages, practical on-farm welfare indicators, ending the systematic killing of male chicks and equivalent import requirements". The strategy states that "high standards for EU producers must be met with reciprocal requirements for imported products, with adequate enforcement tools".

Presenting the Livestock Strategy on 7 July 2026, Commissioner Várhelyi stated "[i]mports from third countries should comply with the same or equivalent standards as those applied in the EU". Commissioner Hansen echoed this, stating that improvements to welfare cannot be a "one-way street", and that the revision represented "an opportunity to introduce equivalent animal welfare requirements for imported products, in line with WTO obligations".[3]

The Commission gives two principal policy reasons for applying equivalent requirements to imports: ensuring fair conditions of competition for EU producers, and meeting citizen expectations concerning animal welfare.

- On the first, the Vision states that ambitious EU standards should not leave the European agri-food sector "at a competitive disadvantage without corresponding reciprocity".[4]
- On public expectations, the Livestock Strategy notes that "[t]hird countries may have lower animal welfare practices while EU citizens expect all products on the EU market to follow high welfare standards".[5]

The strength of that expectation is well documented. In the Commission's 2023 Attitudes of Europeans towards animal welfare Eurobarometer, 94% of EU citizens considered it important that farmed animals be given enough space to move around, lie down and stand up.[6] It also found that 84% wanted action to address animal-welfare standards for imported food, whether through equivalent import requirements or labelling for consumers. Only 11% considered the existing approach sufficient.[7]

FIGURE 1. POLICY TIMELINE

2 OCT 2020

EU citizens call for a cage ban.
The End the Cage Age European Citizens' Initiative is submitted to the Commission with almost 1.4 million verified signatures. It asks for a ban on cages for laying hens among other farmed animal species, and is the first valid initiative on farmed animals.[8]

10 JUN 2021

Parliament calls for equivalent rules on imports.
The European Parliament calls for imported animal products to comply fully with relevant EU legislation, including requirements on cage-free farming systems. The resolution was adopted by 558 votes to 37.

30 JUN 2021

The Commission agrees to consider import rules in its reply to the initiative.
It commits to propose a phase-out of cages and to "consider options for introducing rules or standards for imported products that are equivalent to the EU's and/or a labelling requirement, in compliance with WTO rules".[9]

19 FEB 2025

Equivalent standards become a Commission commitment.
The Vision for Agriculture and Food undertakes that future legislative proposals will apply the same standards to products produced in the EU and to those imported.[10]

19 SEP- 17 DEC 2025

Public consultation on import standards.
The Commission consulted on the extent to which on-farm welfare rules should apply to imports of poultry, eggs, pork, veal, beef and rabbit, and their products.[11]

27 FEB 2026

The Commission publishes the results of the consultation.
96% of all respondents, and 94% of companies and business associations, agree that food of animal origin imported from non-EU countries, including "eggs and egg products" should meet the same animal welfare standards as EU products.[12]

7 JUL 2026

Import requirements included in the planned revisions of animal welfare legislation.
The Livestock Strategy lists equivalent import requirements among the key elements of the laying hen proposal. Commissioner Várhelyi states that imports from third countries should comply with the same or equivalent standards as those applied in the EU.[13]

END OF 2026

Proposal due.
Laying hens legislative proposals are expected.

Existing EU precedents for import requirements

EU legislation already includes measures that make access to the EU market conditional on production practices or the treatment of animals in third countries:

IMPORTED MEAT has been required to meet EU slaughter standards since 2013.[14]

SEAL PRODUCTS have been barred from the EU market since 2010.[15]

FISHERY PRODUCTS have required a catch certificate validated by the vessel's home country since 2010.[16]

COSMETICS containing ingredients tested on animals have been banned from the EU since 2013.[17]

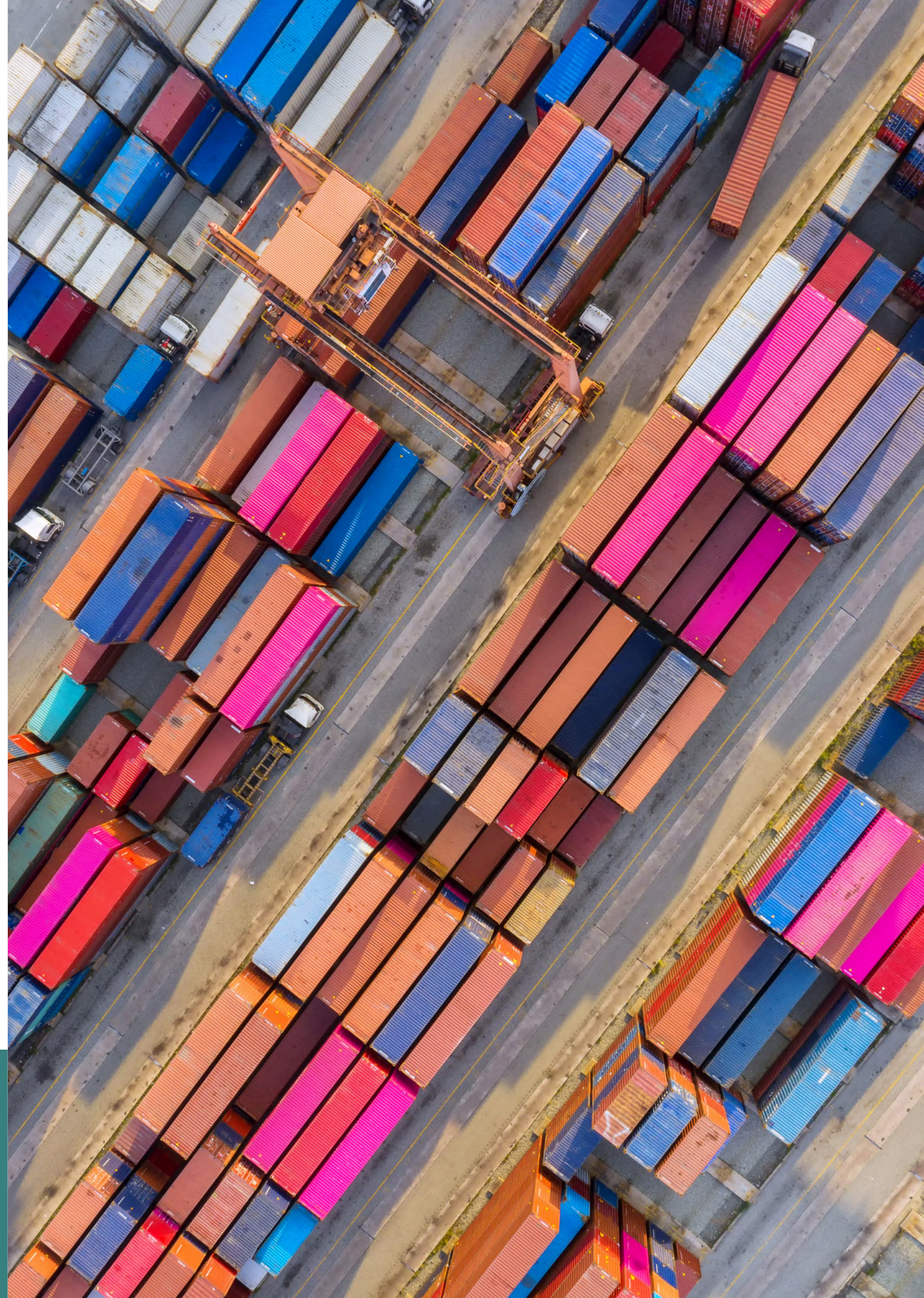
ANTIMICROBIAL USE for growth or yield promotion in animals producing EU exports has been prohibited since 2022, aligning with EU standards.[18]

FIGURE 2. EU IMPORT STANDARDS RELATING TO ANIMALS AND ANIMAL PRODUCTS

INSTRUMENT	WHAT IT CONDITIONS	APPLIES FROM	WTO CHALLENGE
Cosmetics Regulation (EC) No 1223/2009, Article 18(1)(b)	Cosmetics, on whether ingredients were tested on animals	**2013**	No WTO dispute has challenged the measure
IUU Fishing Regulation (EC) No 1005/2008, Article 12	Fishery products, on whether the catch was lawfully taken under the vessel's State's rules	**2010**	No WTO dispute has challenged the measure
Seal Products Regulation (EC) No 1007/2009, Article 3	Seal products, focusing on who conducted the hunt and whether it supports the community's livelihood	**2010**	The Appellate Body accepted that the ban pursued a legitimate public morals objective and was provisionally necessary, but found the EU had not shown the indigenous hunt exception was applied without discrimination. The EU amended the exceptions in 2015 and the ban remains in force.
Slaughter Regulation (EC) No 1099/2009, Article 12	Imported meat, on the standards to which the animals were killed	**2013**	No WTO dispute has challenged the measure
Veterinary Medicines Regulation (EU) 2019/6, Article 118	Animals and products of animal origin, on antimicrobial use on the farm	**2022**	No WTO dispute has challenged the measure

Taken together, these precedents show that EU legislation can make the sale or importation of a product conditional on a production practice in a third country.

They also show how compliance can be verified: the rules on slaughter and antimicrobial use, for example, rely on certification by the exporting country's competent authority. An import requirement for eggs could follow this structure, with the exporting authority certifying that the hens were not kept in cages.



2

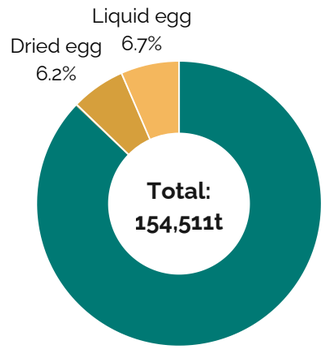
Scope of the requirement: eggs and egg products

Policy discussion of egg import standards has often focused on shell eggs in retail cartons. This does not reflect the full range of egg products entering the EU. A significant share of eggs from caged hens are broken before export and enter the EU through industrial supply chains as 'egg products' in liquid or dried form.

These products are not usually sold directly to consumers. Food manufacturers buy them as ingredients for products like baked goods, sauces, confectionery and prepared meals.

Once incorporated into a finished product there is usually no visibility as to whether the associated hens were kept in cages. This distinction between shell eggs and egg products is also reflected in EU legislation, which defines them separately.

This creates an important consideration for the design of the import requirement. If the policy objective concerns the conditions in which laying hens are kept, the product scope should follow that production condition rather than stop when the egg is broken.



Egg imports in 2025, by volume

Whole egg

Market visibility	High (retail packs)
Primary commercial uses	Fresh consumer purchases

Share of import volume

87.1% 134,649 t

Share of hens impacted

72.4% 7.6M

Dried egg

Market visibility	Low (B2B bulk)
Primary commercial uses	Industrial baking confectionery

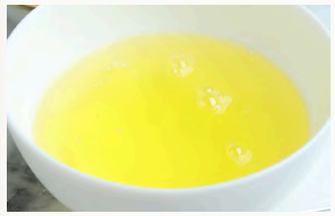
Share of import volume

6.2% 9,518 t

Share of hens impacted

21.8% 2.3M

Liquid egg



Market visibility	Low (B2B bulk)
Primary commercial uses	Sauces mayonnaise, ready meals

Share of import value

6.7% 10,344 t

Share of hens impacted

5.8% 0.6M

How EU legislation distinguishes eggs from egg products

In everyday language, "eggs" can refer both to eggs in shells and to the egg contained inside them. In EU law, "eggs" is a defined term usually meaning eggs in their shells.

Food hygiene legislation defines "eggs" strictly as eggs in their shells, while establishing a separate legal definition for "egg products" as processed derivatives.[19] Since these are distinct product categories, statutory provisions limited to "eggs" do not reach egg products by implication.

EU egg-marketing standards use the same distinction. These standards also explicitly permit member states to waive farm-code stamping on imported eggs delivered directly to food processing facilities. Shell eggs sold to consumers normally have a code printed on them, with the first number showing how the laying hen was kept: in a cage, barn, free-range or organic system. Member states may make an exception for imported shell eggs sent directly to food manufacturers for processing. Since those eggs will not be sold to consumers in shells, they do not have to carry an individual code.

Once eggs have been processed, existing EU rules do not require the finished food to state how the hens were kept.

Confirming the limited reach of these rules, the Commission clarified to Parliament that consumers are informed of farming methods "when buying shell eggs" and that "those rules do not extend to eggs used in processed products".[20] [21]

This distinction also appears in **EU trade policy**. The EU-Mercosur Agreement illustrates the risk of addressing only shell eggs. Its preferential tariff treatment for shell eggs is conditional on compliance with EU laying-hen standards or equivalent requirements, but its separate quotas for egg products contain no equivalent condition. The forthcoming legislation should avoid this gap by applying the import requirement to shell eggs and all other egg products.

There is no legal reason for the Commission to limit the new import requirement to shell eggs. Common Market Organisation rules explicitly encompass both shell eggs and egg products. This shows that EU legislation can cover both categories where the text identifies each of them clearly.

Recent policy developments indicate that extending import requirements to egg products is actively under consideration.

In its 2025 public consultation on modernising animal welfare rules, the European Commission explicitly evaluated "eggs and egg products" as a unified category. That option received overwhelming backing, with up to 92% of responding companies and business associations agreeing that all EU animal welfare rules should apply equally to imported egg products.[22]

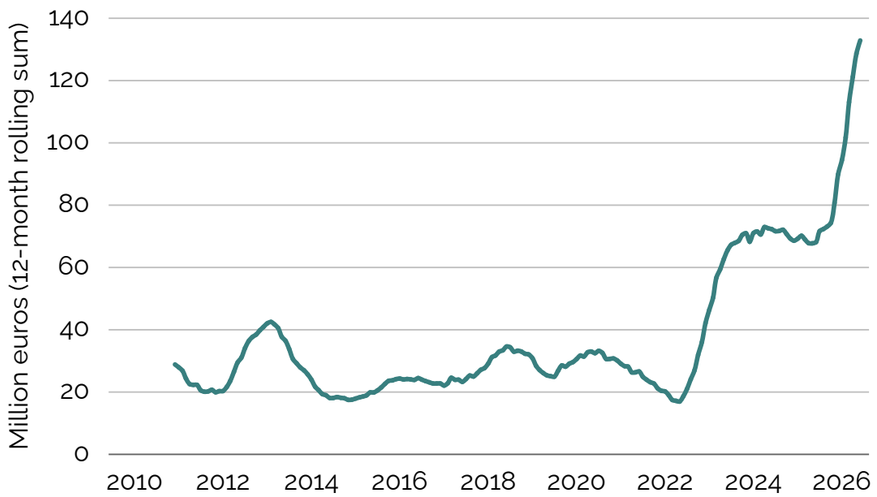
The proposal should therefore explicitly state that the import requirement applies to eggs in shell, and all egg products. Each category would be subject to the same condition, that the specified product must come from hens that were not kept in cages.[23]

The effect of limiting the requirement to shell eggs

The consequences of limiting the requirement to shell eggs can be illustrated through the 2025 import data. Of the estimated 9.3 million caged hens whose products were imported into the EU in 2025, 2.3 million had their products imported in the form of dried or liquid eggs.

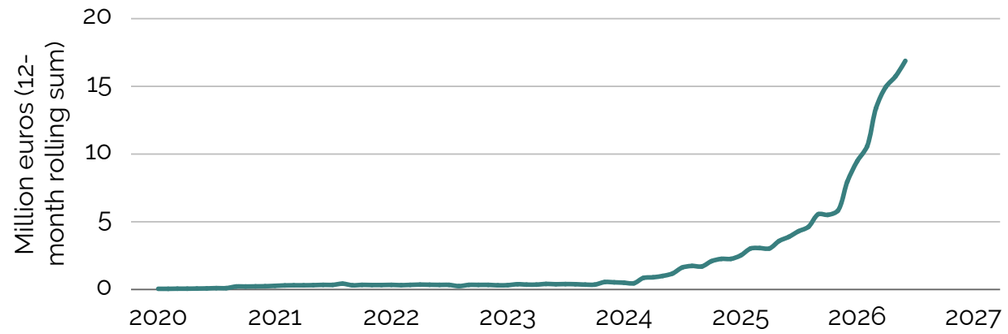
This number is growing. Egg product imports have increased sharply, with €133 million brought into the EU in the twelve months to June 2026, almost double that from over the twelve months to June 2025.

FIGURE 3. EGG PRODUCT IMPORTS OVER TIME



Sources: Comext (Eurostat).
Note: Data to June 2026.
The graph reflects imports from extra-EU nations of products CN 35021190, 35021990, 04089180, 04089980, 04081180, 04081981, and 04081989.

FIGURE 4. EGG PRODUCT IMPORTS FROM CHINA



Imports from China have driven much of this growth, surging from 1% to 13% of total egg product imports by value over just three years with little sign of slowing. In China, over 95% of laying hens are kept in cages, the majority of which are battery cages long since banned in the EU.[24]

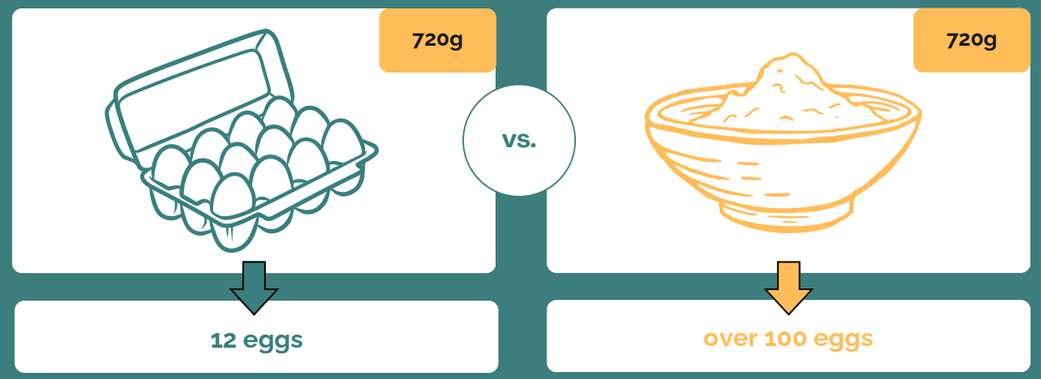
The impact of dried egg imports

Egg products, particularly dried egg products, also represent more laying-hen production than their physical weight alone suggests. In 2025, imports of egg products accounted for 24.4% of the caged hens impacted by EU imports, but made up only 13% of the total mass of egg and egg product imports.

This reflects the concentration of dried egg products. More than half of the water is removed during dehydration, meaning that a relatively small quantity of dried egg can represent a much larger quantity of eggs before processing.

To provide an illustrative example: one dozen fresh eggs weighs around 720g. Meanwhile, the same 720g, but as dried egg white (of which the EU imported around 786 tonnes in 2025), would have taken over 100 eggs to produce.[25]

As referenced previously, the majority of Europeans believe that EU animal welfare rules should apply to imported food.[26] Excluding approximately a quarter of egg product imports by value, and importing the products of millions of caged hens each year, would be inconsistent with the Commission's ambitions, and the preferences of EU citizens.



How accession could affect EU egg imports over time

The composition of EU egg imports may change over time.

Several suppliers of eggs in shell to the EU, including Ukraine, Moldova, North Macedonia and Türkiye, are candidate countries seeking EU membership. The accession process requires candidates to bring their national legislation in line with EU law. If the revised EU rules prohibit cages for laying hens, these countries would therefore be expected to align their production requirements over time.

This process may reduce the supply of shell eggs from caged hens in countries close to the EU, without necessarily reducing demand for imported egg products. More distant suppliers, including China, could fill part of the resulting gap given dried egg can be transported economically over long distances.

Imports could then shift away from shell eggs supplied by accession-track countries and towards dried products from countries whose production rules are not subject to the same process of alignment with EU law. A shell-only requirement would leave that potential shift outside its scope.

Egg products and foods containing egg

The proposed requirement should cover shell eggs and egg products. Egg products are traded as ingredients in their own right and can be traced to the businesses that produced them.

It should not necessarily extend to finished foods that contain egg, such as cakes, sauces or confectionery. Eggs and egg products can be traced to the businesses that produce and process them. Finished foods may contain eggs from several suppliers, farms or countries. Ingredients may also be mixed or incorporated at different stages of production.

Applying the import requirement to finished foods would therefore require authorities to reconstruct the origin and production conditions of egg ingredients across potentially complex supply chains.

By limiting the requirement to eggs and egg products, the EU could cover both consumer-facing shell eggs and the egg products used by food manufacturers while keeping the requirement practical to administer and verify.

Estimated consumer cost of full scope

Applying the import requirement to egg products along with shell eggs may raise questions about its effects on food prices.

Given that imported eggs make up a small portion of total EU consumption, our modelling estimates that including egg products would add only €0.06 per person per year to consumer spending, within an estimated annual cost of around €0.21 per person for an import requirement covering shell, liquid and dried products.[27]

Expressed as a price effect, the requirement is modelled to raise egg prices by around 0.3%. In a survey co-funded by the European Union and carried out for the European Consumer Organisation (BEUC), around seven in ten Europeans said they would accept an increase of that size or larger for food produced to higher animal welfare standards, while three in ten said they would not pay more.[28]

€0.21
additional cost per consumer per year

Implications of excluding processed egg products

- **The hidden volume:** Roughly one-quarter of all caged hens supplying EU egg imports have their products imported in liquid or dried form.
- **Same housing conditions:** Egg products originate from the same cage systems as imported shell eggs. Excluding them leaves a commercial backdoor open for cage-based production.
- **Negligible economic impact:** Our modelling suggests that including egg products would add only €0.06 to the average European's annual budget, within €0.21 for the requirement as a whole.
- **Regulatory coherence:** Covering processed products would align the scope of the import rule more closely with the concern: how laying hens are housed. Comprehensive coverage would also strengthen the relationship between the measure and its public morals justification under WTO rules.

3

Legal design of the import requirement

To deliver on the Commission's commitment to equivalent welfare standards, the proposal must address the legal placement of the requirement and which products it should cover.

This report recommends placing the requirement directly into the revised laying hen legislation and applying it to all eggs and egg products.

Establishing the requirement in EU legislation would provide a common market-access condition across third countries.

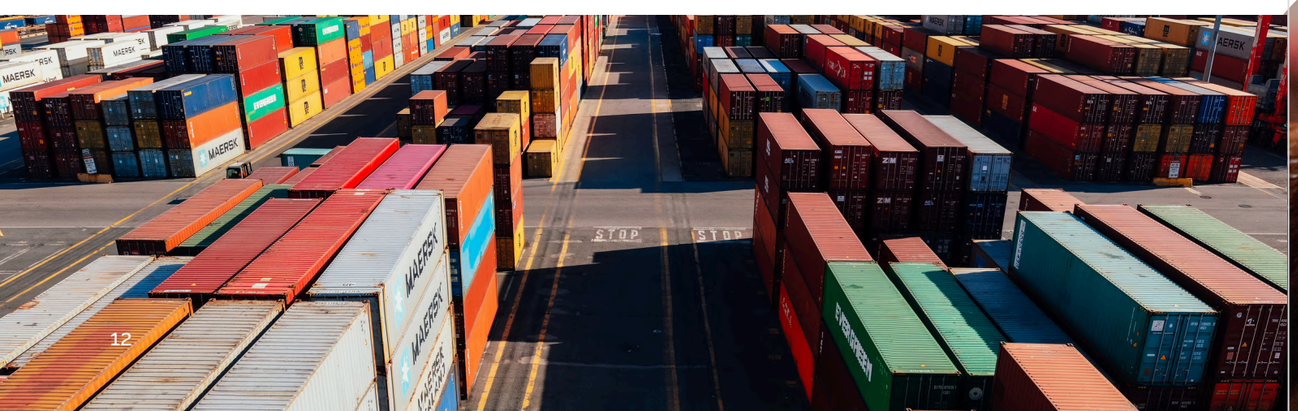
Ensuring it covers egg products means standards depend on the conditions under which hens were kept, rather than whether eggs are broken before they enter the EU.

If either question is left unresolved, caged-hen production will retain routes into the EU market, weakening the measure's animal welfare effect and failing to align with the preferences of EU citizens, as well as creating a less consistent framework for competition between EU-produced and imported products.

Establishing the requirement in the revised laying hen legislation

The import requirement needs to be established in the revised laying hen legislation rather than left to secondary instruments or trade negotiations. This is necessary for two principal reasons:

- **It would apply consistently across third-countries.** It would apply to every external supplier on identical terms, rather than on the outcome of separate negotiations with individual trading partners.
- **Existing certification systems** provide a model for implementation. EU law already requires certificates accompanying imported meat to confirm compliance with animal-welfare requirements at slaughter. Shell eggs and egg products are subject to separate import-certification requirements.[29] These certificates currently cover animal-health and food-safety requirements, but they could be utilised to include confirmation by the exporting country's competent authority that the products came from hens not kept in cages.



The role of trade agreements and labelling

Trade agreements and labelling can complement a legislative import requirement, but neither provides the same coverage on its own.

Free trade agreements (FTAs) leave major gaps.

FTAs only reach individual negotiating partners and typically condition tariff preferences rather than market access.

- Five major exporters (Ukraine, Türkiye, North Macedonia, Argentina, and China) account for over 95% of all egg imports from caged hens entering the EU. In each country, the estimated share of hens kept in cages is over 87%. No existing or pending trade agreement with any of these suppliers conditions EU market access on cage-free production.
- Animal welfare provisions in FTAs have generally focused on cooperation, dialogue and information exchange.[30] The upgraded EU-Ukraine DCFTA goes further by linking additional tariff quotas to Ukraine's gradual alignment with specified EU production standards by the end of 2028. However, it does not establish an immediate cage-free condition for egg imports, and the EU rules with which Ukraine is currently required to align still permit enriched cages.
- EU FTAs have historically omitted welfare conditions for egg products. For example, in the EU-Mercosur agreement, compliance with laying-hen welfare standards is required to obtain preferential tariffs for certain kinds of shell eggs, while separate tariff quotas for egg products carry no equivalent condition.[31]

Labelling has limitations as an alternative approach.

- EU egg marketing standards provide consumers with information about the farming method for shell eggs, but do not impose the same requirement on egg products.[32] Consequently, labelling fails to reach the bulk ingredients used in food manufacturing.
- Furthermore, as highlighted by legal analysis of WTO law from Baldon Avocats, mandatory labelling requires the same administrative verification and certification infrastructure as a market prohibition, yet achieves less by shifting the burden of enforcement onto consumers.[33]

Closing the Welfare Gap

Roughly one in four of all eggs imported into the EU from caged hens arrive as liquid or dried eggs.

Product scope and WTO considerations

An import requirement will need to be designed and applied consistently with the EU's WTO obligations. Article XX(a) of the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT) permits measures that are necessary to protect public morals, subject to the conditions applicable under the Article XX framework. As evidenced by its use to uphold the EU's ban of seal product imports, WTO case law has recognised animal welfare as falling within the scope of public morals.

Independent legal analysis supports the feasibility of this approach. In an opinion prepared for Eurogroup for Animals, Baldon Avocats concludes that WTO law "does not bar the EU from implementing well-calibrated animal welfare import requirements".

The opinion finds that WTO law leaves sufficient room to condition market access on compliance with domestic or equivalent animal-welfare requirements. It identifies cages as a situation in which requiring compliance with the EU prohibition may be justified, given the evidence that only non-cage systems are ethically acceptable to the EU public and provide laying hens with an adequate level of welfare.[34]

Legal requirements for a public morals justification

WTO case law shows that animal welfare is now widely recognised to be part of public morals under GATT XX(a). The term "public morals" generally refers to "standards of right and wrong" prevailing in a given territory.

To justify an import restriction under Article XX(a), WTO members must satisfy the following criteria:

1. **Public moral consensus:** Demonstrate that the restriction addresses a genuine moral concern within the jurisdiction.
2. **Pass the necessity test:** Show that the measure is necessary to achieve the objective, meaning no reasonably available less-trade-restrictive alternative can achieve the required level of protection.
3. **Design and moral consistency:** Ensure the measure's design directly contributes to its moral goal and is applied consistently.

The policy evidence supporting an animal-welfare objective is substantial

1. **Public demand:** Nearly 1.4 million citizens signed the *End the Cage Age European Citizens' Initiative.*[35] The 2023 *Attitudes of Europeans towards animal welfare* Eurobarometer demonstrates that 94% of citizens want farmed animals to have enough space to move, and 84% support taking action on imports that do not meet EU animal welfare standards.[36]
2. **Necessity of import legislation:** As discussed above, bilateral trade agreements or consumer labelling are insufficient to address egg and egg-product imports that fail to meet the welfare standards imposed on EU producers.

Preserving moral consistency under GATT Article XX(a)

The question of product coverage would be important to the EU's public morals defence if the measure were challenged through the WTO. A requirement limited to shell eggs would treat egg products from caged hens differently solely because they were broken before import. This could be difficult to reconcile with the measure's stated animal welfare objective and may in turn weaken its WTO justification.

The public morals objection is to keeping laying hens in restricted cage environments, not to whether their eggs are subsequently sold in shell, liquid or dried form. A requirement that stops at shell eggs asserts that the EU considers caged production morally unacceptable when sold as a fresh retail item, but acceptable when the same eggs from the same farm arrive as liquid or powder. In EC – Seal Products, the WTO Panel emphasised that the stated moral objective must genuinely and consistently be pursued. Allowing large volumes of eggs from caged hens to enter the EU would undermine the contribution the measure makes to its public morals goal.[37]

Design features supporting WTO compatibility

A number of features could strengthen the EU's position:

- **Equivalent application:** Apply welfare standards on imports based on housing practice rather than country of origin.
- **Comprehensive scope:** Cover eggs and egg products falling within the relevant customs classifications, including shell eggs and egg products (CN 0407, CN 0408, CN 3502) so laying hen housing is treated identically regardless of the form the product enters in.
- **Direct and genuine welfare purpose:** Maintain a clear connection between the requirement and the stated animal-welfare objective.
- **Uniform transition:** Provide a defined transition period on identical terms for all trading partners.
- **Fact-based certification:** Require verification of a simple factual condition by exporting competent authorities, mirroring established EU import frameworks.

4

Recommendations and conclusion

The forthcoming revision of the laying-hen legislation is the point at which the Commission's commitments on imported products should be established in legislation. In both its *Vision for Agriculture and Food* and its *Livestock Strategy,* the Commission clearly links high domestic animal welfare standards with reciprocal requirements for imported products.

As the EU prepares to complete the internal phase-out of caged housing for laying hens, the import requirement will need to address both the source of imported products and the full range of products through which eggs enter the EU market.

Policy recommendations

01

Establish the requirement in the revised laying hen legislation.

The revised legislation should establish the binding requirement for imported eggs and egg products. This would create a common baseline for imports from all third countries, rather than leaving its application to negotiations with individual trading partners.

02

Define the product scope through the relevant customs categories explicitly.

The requirement should apply to both shell eggs and egg products. The legislation should identify the relevant products under CN headings 0407 and 0408 and the relevant subheadings of CN heading 3502. This is important as EU legislation distinguishes shell eggs from egg products. A reference to "eggs" alone may therefore not provide sufficient legal certainty that processed products are covered.

Model text for consideration

To ensure the import requirement is legally sound, unambiguous, and fully scoped from the outset, the Commission can integrate the following targeted drafting, prepared by Baldon Avocats, directly into the laying hens proposal:

Article X: Requirements for imported eggs and egg products

1. This Article applies to eggs and egg products obtained from laying hens and falling within CN headings ex 0407, ex 0408, and ex 3502.
2. The products referred to in paragraph 1 may be brought into the Union for the purpose of being placed on the Union market only if they have been obtained from laying hens kept in housing systems that comply with any of the following requirements:
3. the requirements contained in Chapter [X] of this Regulation/Directive; or.
4. requirements recognised by the Union to be equivalent to those set out by Chapter [X] of this Regulation/Directive.
5. Consignments of products referred to in paragraph 2 originating from third countries shall be accompanied by an official certificate issued by the competent authority of the exporting country attesting compliance with the requirements specified in paragraph 2.
6. The Commission is empowered, by means of implementing acts, to establish a procedure for the recognition by the Union of equivalent conditions under paragraph 2, point (b).
7. Specific requirements on the official certificates referred in paragraph 3 are to be laid down by the Commission, by means of implementing acts, in accordance with Article 90 of Regulation (EU) 2017/625.

By adopting primary statutory requirements scoped comprehensively across all egg custom headings, the Commission will deliver true market reciprocity and guarantee that all egg products sold in the Single Market align with European values.

Appendices

Trade-data tables

FIGURE 5. 2025 IMPORTS FROM CAGED HENS

COUNTRY OF ORIGIN	DRIED	LIQUID	SHELL	ALL PRODUCTS	SHARE OF TOTAL
Ukraine	1,435,736	189,258	5,270,463	6,895,457	74%
Türkiye	9,705	50,942	1,038,526	1,099,172	12%
United Kingdom	48,552	46,549	30,742	125,843	1%
North Macedonia	0	1,986	491,739	493,725	5%
People's Republic of China	218,287	5,180	23,039	246,506	3%
Argentina	164,680	0	0	164,680	2%
Bosnia and Herzegovina	0	0	105,684	105,684	1%
Norway	381	2,044	648	3,073	0%
Moldova	0	0	27,898	27,898	0%
India	68,455	1	0	68,456	1%
United States of America	18,906	4,775	2,027	25,708	0%
Albania	0	5,127	37,823	42,950	0%
Switzerland*	0	0	0	0	0%
Japan	2	0	4,805	4,806	0%
Mexico	3,492	1,153	0	4,645	0%
Serbia	1,236	2,330	0	3,566	0%
All other countries	14	122	66	202	0%
Total	**1,969,445**	**309,468**	**7,033,459**	**9,312,371**	**100%**

*Notes: *Switzerland has banned cages, and so none of its exports are from caged hens.*
Sources: Comext (Eurostat); and API calculations: animalpolicyinternational.org/eu-eggs-data

FIGURE 6. 2025 EGG-PRODUCT IMPORTS BY PRODUCT TYPE (EGG-WEIGHT EQUIVALENT TONNES)

COUNTRY OF ORIGIN	DRIED	LIQUID	SHELL	ALL PRODUCTS	SHARE OF TOTAL
Ukraine	25,143	3,314	92,297	120,754	64%
Türkiye	217	1,141	23,251	24,609	13%
United Kingdom	5,909	5,665	3,741	15,315	8%
North Macedonia	0	40	9,953	9,993	5%
People's Republic of China	4,112	98	434	4,643	2%
Argentina	4,539	0	0	4,539	2%
Bosnia and Herzegovina	0	0	2,081	2,081	1%
Norway	212	1,136	360	1,707	1%
Moldova	0	0	1,515	1,515	1%
India	1,155	0	0	1,155	1%
United States of America	806	204	86	1,097	1%
Albania	0	102	753	855	0%
Switzerland	18	224	43	285	0%
Mexico	0	0	133	133	0%
Japan	81	27	0	107	0%
Serbia	25	46	0	71	0%
All other countries	0	3	1	4	0%
Total	**42,216**	**11,999**	**134,649**	**188,864**	**100%**

Sources: Comext (Eurostat); and API calculations: animalpolicyinternational.org/eu-eggs-data

FIGURE 7. 2025 EGG-PRODUCT IMPORTS BY PRODUCT TYPE (EUROS)

COUNTRY OF ORIGIN	DRIED	LIQUID	SHELL	ALL PRODUCTS	SHARE OF TOTAL
Ukraine	38,126,069	7,772,069	162,776,017	208,674,155	62%
Türkiye	266,720	2,629,176	38,544,564	41,440,460	12%
United Kingdom	4,382,244	14,471,904	10,250,255	29,104,403	9%
North Macedonia	0	51,988	18,581,166	18,633,154	6%
People's Republic of China	7,461,081	496,929	1,579,295	9,537,305	3%
Argentina	5,883,689	0	0	5,883,689	2%
Bosnia and Herzegovina	0	0	4,224,263	4,224,263	1%
Norway	16,166	587,516	695,290	1,298,972	0%
Moldova	0	0	2,990,362	2,990,362	1%
India	1,715,228	108	1	1,715,337	1%
United States of America	3,598,430	982,288	2,420,219	7,000,937	2%
Albania	0	175,560	1,366,600	1,542,160	0%
Switzerland	76,299	652,268	137,897	866,464	0%
Mexico	231	0	1,966,175	1,966,406	1%
Japan	136,031	58,650	0	194,681	0%
Serbia	140,000	203,800	0	343,800	0%
All other countries	54,776	13,002	52,244	120,022	0%
Total	**61,856,964**	**28,095,258**	**245,584,348**	**335,536,570**	**100%**

Sources: Comext (Eurostat); and API calculations: animalpolicyinternational.org/eu-eggs-data

Welfare-standard comparison

FIGURE 8. LEGALITY OF BATTERY CAGE SYSTEMS BY COUNTRY

COUNTRY	LEGAL STATUS OF BATTERY CAGES
Ukraine	Banned from 2026; enforcement unverified
Türkiye	Permitted until 2029 (recently pushed back)
United Kingdom	Banned
North Macedonia	New battery cages banned; existing battery cages permitted
People's Republic of China	Allowed
Argentina	Allowed
Bosnia and Herzegovina	Banned from 2015; enforcement unverified
Norway	Banned
Moldova	Permitted until 2035
India	Allowed
United States of America	Allowed in most states
Albania	Allowed
Switzerland	Banned
Mexico	Allowed
Japan	Allowed
Serbia	New battery cages banned; existing battery cages permitted

Methods and assumptions

Price impacts

To estimate the expected price effects from a cage ban imposed on domestic and imported products, we first estimate total EU-wide consumption, which equates to EU domestic production minus EU exports plus EU imports.

FIGURE 9. 2025 PRODUCTION AND CONSUMPTION

CHANNEL	TONNES	SHARE OF TOTAL CONSUMPTION
A: Production	6,395,605	103%
B: Exports	361,212	6%
C: Production consumed domestically (A – B)	6,034,393	97%
D: Imports	188,864	3%
E: Consumption (C + D)	6,223,257	100%

We then estimate what proportion of production from each country, be it extra-EU or intra-EU, comes from caged systems.

From here, we use estimates from van Horne and Bondt's (2023) *Competitiveness of the EU egg sector* to estimate the post-transition production cost increase attributable to moving out of cage systems. For EU countries, 97.8% of costs are assumed to relate to production (with the rest attributable to transport), with this figure falling to a weighted average of 85.0% for countries exporting to the EU, who face higher transport costs, and EU import levies.

Again from van Horne and Bondt (2023), we assume that production costs are 15% higher outside of cage systems.

Combining our estimates with van Horne and Bondt's (2023) figures, we come to a total price increase of 5% from banning egg products produced in cages either within or outside of the EU. While costs from imported products rise more than domestic products (11.1% vs 4.8%), given they make up only 3% of total consumption, they contribute only 0.3 percentage points to the total 5% price rise.

FIGURE 10. 2025 CONSUMPTION (WEIGHTED AVERAGE OF INDIVIDUAL COUNTRY FIGURES)

CONSUMPTION	CAGE SHARE	SHARE OF COSTS FROM PRODUCTION	PRICE INCREASE
Domestically produced	32.5%	97.8%	4.8%
Imported	86.8%	85.0%	11.1%
Total	**34.1%**	**97.4%**	**5.0%**

More detailed calculations can be found in our public model: animalpolicyinternational.org/eu-eggs-data.

Caged-hens impacted

To estimate the number of caged hens whose products were imported into the EU in 2025, we look at each trading partner's exports in egg-weight- equivalent tonnes. These units convert raw tonnage estimates into their shell-egg weight equivalent, i.e., adjusting for the dehydration of dried egg products, and adding back shell weight.

From here, we inflate these figures by just less than five per cent, taken from Gustavsson et al. (2013), to account for waste during production, processing, and packaging.

Following this, we convert these waste-adjusted tonnes into the years of laying it would take hens from each individual country to lay these eggs. This accounts for differences in hen yields and egg weights across countries.

These laying-hen years are then converted to the number of hens taken to produce these products, based on the average laying life of hens across each country.

From here, we estimate the number of caged hens that were used to produce these products based on our estimates of cage share across countries.

More detailed calculations can be found in our public model: animalpolicyinternational.org/eu-eggs-data.

References

1 European Commission (2026) EU strategy on livestock [COM(2026) 576 final], pp. 10 and 12. Available at: https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX:52026DC0576.
2 European Commission (2025) A Vision for Agriculture and Food: Shaping together an attractive farming and agri-food sector for future generations [COM(2025) 75 final], pp. 13-14. Available at: https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:52025DC0075.
3 European Commission (2026) Remarks by Executive Vice-President Fitto, Commissioner Hansen and Commissioner Várhelyi on the Livestock Strategy and Protein Action Plan [SPEECH/26/1548], 7 July 2026. Available at: https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/speech_26_1548.
4 European Commission (2025) A Vision for Agriculture and Food: Shaping together an attractive farming and agri-food sector for future generations [COM(2025) 75 final], pp. 13-14. Available at: European Commission (2025) A Vision for Agriculture and Food: Shaping together an attractive farming and agri-food sector for future generations [COM(2025) 75 final], pp. 13-16. Available at: https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:52025DC0075.
5 European Commission (2026) EU strategy on livestock [COM(2026) 576 final], p. 12. Available at: https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX:52026DC0576.
6 European Commission (2023) Special Eurobarometer 533: Attitudes of Europeans towards Animal Welfare, question QC5.1, p. 26. Available at: https://webgate.ec.europa.eu/ebsm/api/public/deliverable/download?doc=true&deliverableId=88297.
7 European Commission (2023) Special Eurobarometer 533: Attitudes of Europeans towards Animal Welfare, question QC8, p. 48. Available at: https://webgate.ec.europa.eu/ebsm/api/public/deliverable/download?doc=true&deliverableId=88297.
8 European Citizens' Initiative Forum (2021) End the Cage Age [ECI(2018)000004], p. 3. Available at: https://citizens-initiative-forum.europa.eu/sites/default/files/2021-07/End%20the%20Cage%20Age%20EN.pdf.
9 European Commission (2021) Communication on the European Citizens' Initiative "End the Cage Age" [C(2021) 4747 final], 30 June 2021. Commission summary of its reply at: https://food.ec.europa.eu/animals/animal-welfare/eci/eci-end-cage-age_en.
10 European Commission (2025) A Vision for Agriculture and Food: Shaping together an attractive farming and agri-food sector for future generations [COM(2025) 75 [final], pp. 13-14. Available at: https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:52025DC0075.
11 European Commission (2026) Factual summary report of the public consultation on the modernisation of the EU's on-farm animal welfare rules for certain animals [Ref. Ares(2026)2192718], 27 February 2026, p. 1 and pp. 4-5. Available at: https://aeur.eu/f/l1m.
12 European Commission (2026) Factual summary report of the public consultation on the modernisation of the EU's on-farm animal welfare rules for certain animals [Ref. Ares(2026)2192718], 27 February 2026, pp. 4-5. Available at: https://aeur.eu/f/l1m.
13 European Commission (2026) Remarks by Executive Vice-President Fitto, Commissioner Hansen and Commissioner Várhelyi on the Livestock Strategy and Protein Action Plan [SPEECH/26/1548], 7 July 2026. Available at: https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/speech_26_1548.
14 European Union (2009) Regulation (EC) No 1099/2009 on the protection of animals at the time of killing [OJ L 303/1, 18.11.2009], Article 12, at PDF page 7 of 30; date of application at Article 30. Available at: https://eur-lex.europa.eu/LexUriServ/LexUriServ.do?uri=OJ:L:2009:303:0001:0030:EN:PDF.
15 European Union (2009) Regulation (EC) No 1007/2009 on trade in seal products [OJ L 286/36, 31.10.2009], Article 3, which applies from 20 August 2010 (Article 8). Available at: https://eur-lex.europa.eu/eli/reg/2009/1007/oj.
16 European Union (2008) Council Regulation (EC) No 1005/2008 establishing a Community system to prevent, deter and eliminate illegal, unreported and unregulated fishing [OJ L 286/1, 29.10.2008], Article 12(1) to (3). Available at: https://eur-lex.europa.eu/eli/reg/2008/1005/oj.
17 European Union (2009) Regulation (EC) No 1223/2009 on cosmetic products [OJ L 342/59, 22.12.2009], Article 18(1)(b), dates at Article 18(2). Available at: https://eur-lex.europa.eu/eli/reg/2009/1223/oj.
18 European Union (2019) Regulation (EU) 2019/6 on veterinary medicinal products [OJ L 4/43, 7.1.2019], Articles 118(1) and 107(2), with reserved antimicrobials designated under Article 37(5); applies from 28 January 2022 (Article 153). Available at: https://eur-lex.europa.eu/eli/reg/2019/6/oj.
19 European Union (2004) Regulation (EC) No 853/2004 laying down specific hygiene rules for food of animal origin [consolidated text 02004R0853-20241109], Annex I, points 5.1 and 7.3. Available at: https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX%3A02004R0853-20241109. Point 5.1 defines 'eggs' as "eggs in shell — other than broken, incubated or cooked eggs — that are produced by farmed birds and are fit for direct human consumption or for the preparation of egg products". Point 7.3 defines 'egg products' as "processed products resulting from the processing of eggs, or of various components or mixtures of eggs, or from the further processing of such processed products".
20 European Union (2023) Commission Delegated Regulation (EU) 2023/2465 supplementing Regulation (EU) No 1308/2013 as regards marketing standards for eggs [OJ L, 2023/2465, 8.11.2023], Article 11(2) and Article 22(1) and (4). Available at: https://eur-lex.europa.eu/eli/reg_del/2023/2465/oj. Article 22(1) provides that the equivalence evaluation "shall extend to the rules on marking and labelling, farming methods and checks as well as their implementation". Article 22(4) requires packs to bear the farming method as "non-EU standard" where equivalence is not established.
21 European Commission (2024) Answer to parliamentary question E-001190/2024, Use of eggs in processed foods – a level playing field. Available at: https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/E-9-2024-001190-ASW_EN.html.
22 European Commission (2026) Factual summary report of the public consultation on the modernisation of the EU's on-farm animal welfare rules for certain animals [Ref. Ares(2026)2192718], 27 February 2026. Available at: https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=intcom%3AAres%282026%292192718.
23 Eggs in shell fall within CN heading 0407 and egg products not in shell within heading 0408. Egg albumin is classified in Chapter 35 under heading 3502, outside the egg headings, which is why it needs naming separately.
24 Our World in Data (2026) Laying hens in cages and cage-free housing, China, 2018 (97% of laying hens in cages). Available at: https://ourworldindata.org/grapher/laying-hens-cages-and-cage-free.
25 This calculation assumes an average egg weight of 60g, and converts dried egg white by the EU Commission's egg-weight equivalent conversion factor of 8.56.
26 European Commission (2023) Special Eurobarometer 533: Attitudes of Europeans towards Animal Welfare, question QC8, p. 48. Available at: https://webgate.ec.europa.eu/ebsm/api/public/deliverable/download?doc=true&deliverableId=88297.
27 Animal Policy International (2026) EU laying hen analysis, Price and Outputs tabs. Available at: https://animalpolicyinternational.org/eu-eggs-data.
28 The European Consumer Organisation (BEUC) (2024) Farm animal welfare: what consumers want. A survey of Europeans' understanding and expectations [BEUC- X-2024-016], p. 11. Available at: https://www.beuc.eu/sites/default/files/publications/BEUC-X-2024-016_Farm_animal_welfare_what_consumers_want_survey.pdf. BEUC is the Bureau Européen des Unions de Consommateurs. Survey conducted with ICRT (International Consumer Research and Testing) across eight Member States, fieldwork November 2023, 8,070 respondents (p. 6).
29 European Union (2020) Commission Implementing Regulation (EU) 2020/2235 on model animal health and official certificates for the entry into the Union of consignments of certain animals and goods [consolidated text 02020R2235-20260312], Annex III, Chapters 19 and 20. Available at: https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX%3A02020R2235-20260312. Chapter 19 is the model certificate for eggs (Model E), Chapter 20 for egg products (Model EP).
30 European Commission (2022) Report on the application of EU health and environmental standards to imported agricultural and agri-food products [COM(2022) 226 final], 3 June 2022, p. 17. Available at: https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:52022DC0226.
31 European Union and Mercosur (2026) Interim Trade Agreement, Annex 2-A (Tariff elimination schedule), Section A, paragraph 6(o), p. 17, and paragraphs 14 and 15, pp. 36-37. Available at: https://policy.trade.ec.europa.eu/eu-trade-relationships-country-and-region/countries-and-regions/mercosur/eu-mercosur- agreement/text-agreement_en.
32 European Union (2023) Commission Delegated Regulation (EU) 2023/2465 supplementing Regulation (EU) No 1308/2013 as regards marketing standards for eggs [OJ L, 2023/2465, 8.11.2023], Article 2(g). Available at: https://eur-lex.europa.eu/eli/reg_del/2023/2465/oj.
33 Baldon Avocats (2025) Assessment of the feasibility of applying the EU's animal welfare standards to imported products under WTO law, legal opinion commissioned by Eurogroup for Animals, 9 July 2025, para. 106, p. 23. Available at: https://www.eurogroupforanimals.org/library/assessment-feasibility-applying-eus-animal-welfare-standards-imported-products-under-wto.
34 Baldon Avocats (2025) Assessment of the feasibility of applying the EU's animal welfare standards to imported products under WTO law, legal opinion commissioned by Eurogroup for Animals, 9 July 2025, paras. 105 and 107, pp. 22-23. Available at: https://www.eurogroupforanimals.org/library/assessment-feasibility-applying-eus-animal-welfare-standards-imported-products-under- wto.
35 European Citizens' Initiative Forum (2021) End the Cage Age [ECI(2018)000004], p. 3, recording submission to the Commission on 2 October 2020. Available at: https://citizens-initiative-forum.europa.eu/sites/default/files/2021-07/End%20the%20Cage%20Age%20EN.pdf.
36 European Commission (2023) Special Eurobarometer 533: Attitudes of Europeans towards Animal Welfare, question QC5.1, p. 26, and question QC8, p. 48. Available at: https://webgate.ec.europa.eu/ebsm/api/public/deliverable/download?doc=true&deliverableId=88297.
37 WTO Panel Report (2014) European Communities – Measures Prohibiting the Importation and Marketing of Seal Products [WT/DS400/R and WT/DS401/R], adopted 18 June 2014, paras. 7.444-7.445. Available at: https://www.wto.org/english/tratop_e/dispu_e/400_401r_e.pdf.