

SUSTAINABILITY NEXT STEPS

Egg Farmers of Alberta (EFA) recently published its inaugural Sustainability Report. This marks the start of a new kind of engagement with consumers and along the egg value chain. Here's what you can expect in 2015 and beyond.

Most of us enjoy eggs every week, if not daily, but have you ever met an egg farmer? Have you seen first-hand how hens are raised, housed, fed and cared for? Do you know how fresh eggs move from the farmer's barn to your local grocery store?

For many of us, the answer to all three questions is: no.

It's a bit ironic, isn't it? This dietary mainstay reaches millions of Alberta consumers, day after day, but the story behind the egg and Alberta's egg farmers is not always well known.

EFA - representing the 164 farms in Alberta that produce our eggs - recently took a big step to help consumers understand more about where their carton of eggs comes from and how it gets to them.

On February 25, 2015, EFA released its inaugural Sustainability Report.

This report explores how consumer attitudes to egg production have changed in recent years. It pinpoints a widening perceptual gap between egg farmers and some consumers on issues such as animal care, food safety and environmental stewardship.

With the Sustainability Report, EFA is stepping forward to tell its story in new ways. The report is a forum for EFA to share information with consumers and others, reporting on the industry's status and progress with respect to animal care, food safety and environmental impact. That's a first for egg farmers in Alberta, and it puts EFA on the leading edge of consumer engagement in the agriculture and food industry.

EFA points to three ways they're supporting these words with action.

Opening the barn doors



“Our industry has been inwardly focused for a long time,” says Schafers. “The reality is, you could be doing the best job in the world, but if nobody knows it, you need to reach out to them.”

You've never been to an egg farm? Starting in 2015, EFA wants to share the realities of egg production as never before. EFA Chair Susan Schafers, who owns a free-run farm with 7,000 hens near Stony Plain, fully supports this more open policy.

Mention the phrase egg production to people and you'll get a variety of responses. Some will talk about the healthy, high-quality food they eat every day. Some will express concern about hen housing or another animal care issue. A few may state that egg production should be stopped altogether on ethical or environmental grounds.

As EFA General Manager Susan Gal sees it, despite the range of opinion that's out there, one fact remains: most Albertans have never seen an egg farm up close. She believes it's time more people had this opportunity.

“Alberta’s egg farmers are the people who can demonstrate how well we look after our birds, and everything we do to ensure food safety and protect the environment,” says Gal. “Their passion and dedication comes through in spades. We need to remind our producers to provide that experience, because people sharing what they do on their farm is the best approach we can take.”

Four million Albertans visiting 164 egg farms poses a bit of a logistical challenge. Watch for information on how EFA is opening the barn doors and bringing more of us inside.

Across the egg value chain

Across the egg value chain. A farmer cares for the hens that produce the eggs. Just a few days later, you buy those eggs at your local market. From a consumer's perspective, that's more or less how it works.

Muneer Gilani sees the egg value chain in broader terms. A former EFA Board member, he and his family are egg farmers who also grade and package their own eggs, and those of many other farmers.

To develop its sustainability strategy, EFA brought together all the different players in the egg value chain – farmers, graders, processors and retailers – to discuss the issues. While these players contribute to the same mission every day – bringing eggs to consumers' tables – it's only seldom they meet face to face.

Naturally, those along the value chain have their differences from time to time. Gilani believes that more frequent contact – one outcome of the sustainability strategy – should allow for greater cooperation. That can benefit consumers in terms of quality and safety, and the egg industry in terms of operational efficiency.

That only makes sense because, as Gilani sees it, everyone ultimately shares the same objective.

"I'd like consumers to feel that, whenever we might have challenges, they can trust us to manage them," says Gilani. "We're proud of this industry and want the consumer to have confidence in our product."

HEALTHY BIRDS
HEALTHY FARMS **HEALTHY EGGS**
HEALTHY COMMUNITIES

Stakeholder forums: come one, come all

If you eat eggs, as far as EFA is concerned, you're a stakeholder. If you sell eggs, or serve eggs in a restaurant, you're a stakeholder too. That's as you might expect, but to EFA in 2015, a stakeholder is anyone with a viewpoint about eggs – positive, negative or even downright hostile.

"As egg farmers, we can't operate without social licence," says Gal. "It's easy to only talk to people who agree with you. Our approach is to reach out more broadly and truly listen to what people say."

During 2014, as EFA was developing its sustainability strategy, it met with many groups with a wide variety of views and perceptions about egg production. EFA plans to keep the conversation going. The strategy calls for periodic stakeholder workshops to discuss the issues and seek common ground.

One of these issues, undoubtedly, is hen housing. Schafers operates a free-run barn, and having made the conversion from conventional housing, she can shine some light on what's involved.

"I want to see strong interactions between these different groups," says Schafers. "If we can get together a couple of times a year, we can create understanding. I'd want to share with people that moving to free-run egg production doesn't happen overnight. It's a complex, longer-term process."

Whether you're a staunch defender or ardent critic, EFA says you have a place at the table. Check the EFA website for news on these stakeholder workshops. The first workshop topic will focus on discussing on-farm environmental stewardship initiatives with all stakeholders. This will support the continuation and momentum built from EFA's launch of the Canadian egg industry's first on-farm environmental program (Producer Environmental Egg Program) and the development of its Sustainability Strategy and release of its inaugural Sustainability Report.

EFA is reaching out to everyone with a viewpoint on egg production. Over the next three years, the organization plans to deliver relevant information, report on egg farmers' performance and create opportunities for the exchange of ideas.

Join us on the journey. As the first step, EFA invites you to download and read the Egg Farmers of Alberta [2014 Sustainability Report](#).