

Animal Farm

THE RSPCA is to launch a campaign in schools through out Britain against factory farming this month. A video, 'Food for Protest,' will be sent to every education authority in the country as well as to universities and agricultural colleges.

The 45-minute video describes the ill treatment inherent in factory farming and urges students to 'Write to the Prime Minister, your MP, your Euro MP, the Minister of Agriculture. And talk to your butcher.'

Already the National Farmers' Union has condemned the video for being 'emotive and unbalanced.'

For the RSPCA, the school campaign signifies a new approach — taking the offensive for the first time, rather than just reacting to animal abuse.

Cindy Milburn, the RSPCA's Head of Education, says the reason is 'quite simply public pressure.'

'Many people who have no wish to become vegetarians none the less feel farm animals should be reared and slaughtered humanely. We are putting the onus on the public. More humane conditions for animals means more expensive food. The consumer, in the end, will have to pay the price.'

I saw the video with a group of 14- and 15-year-olds at the Crispin Comprehensive School in Street, Somerset, in the heart of rich farming land.

We saw the newest and most sophisticated battery hen unit, housing 56,000 hens; five birds to a cage, tier upon tier of cages. The hens lived in a temperature- and humidity-controlled environment; a huge blade scraped away their droppings. The eggs were laid on wire mesh and rolled down to a conveyor belt.

Since the cage size was 18 ins by 20 ins, and a hen's wing-spread is 30 ins, hens can never spread their wings. Any inquisitive bird who poked her head through the mesh got a shock from an electrified wire designed to prevent the birds harming eggs on the conveyor belt.

A campaign in schools against intensive farming marks a new vigorous approach by the RSPCA, writes JANE PONCIA.

The RSPCA condemns the battery system, and has reservations about the more humane perchery system we also saw. It showed a cathedral-sized barn with perches at different levels. The birds could stretch their wings and fly small distances. But the weaker birds cannot evade the stronger ones, and are frequently attacked.

The priority for veal calves is white meat. So calves are weaned at one week, and fed on powdered milk and water. Initially they are given an iron supplement, but in the interests of pale meat, this is gradually withdrawn. If the calves were not slaughtered at 18 weeks, they would probably die of anaemia.

The film showed the worst conditions are reserved for pregnant sows, who for the three months of their pregnancy are chained to the concrete floor of dark sheds. When a sow is due to give birth, she is put in a steel crate to prevent sudden movement which could crush the piglets. After giving birth, the mother is unable to reach her piglets, or look after them, as the crate prevents her from moving easily.

Of the 30 pupils who watched the video, only four had parents in farming, and they used traditional methods. The girls in particular looked stricken at the plight of the sows, and both boys and girls felt indignant at the deprivation of liberty that results from intensive farming. The Crispin pupils agreed they would like to see it made illegal.

'Food for Protest' is available on loan free from: RSPCA, The Causeway, Horsham, Sussex. (0403) 64181 or Viscom Ltd, Park Hall Road Trading Estate, London SE8 5EL (01-761 3035).