

Factory farms on alert for attack

by J. W. MURRAY, our Farming Reporter

POULTRY farms and egg-processing plants are on the alert this weekend at the beginning of a week of 'action for the abolition of the battery cage' organised by Compassion in World Farming.

The main objective is to convince consumers to boycott battery eggs under the slogan 'Don't eat a battery egg,' but there are fears that some animal welfare campaigners may resort to violent action against battery cage establishments.

The protest comes at a time when the Commons Select Committee on Agriculture has concluded six months' investigation into animal welfare and is beginning work on its report.

The committee which consists of four Conservatives and four Labour MPs under the chairmanship of Sir William Elliott (Conservative, Newcastle upon Tyne), has confined its inquiry to poultry, pigs and veal calves, but the battery cage has virtually overshadowed all other issues.

The burden of the evidence they have received is such that it is unlikely that the committee, most of whose members appear to have ethical objections to the system, will go further than to recommend more research into alternatives that could effectively replace the battery cages.

Ninety-six per cent of the eggs sold in Britain are produced in battery cages, with normally five birds in a cage 18in by 20in. The animal welfare organisations say this is life imprisonment worse than in human jails because the prisoners here get no exercise: They cannot even flap their wings.

But expert evidence presented to the committee revealed that when hens are put in cages in which they can flap their wings, there is often a high incidence of broken wings and other injuries.

One alternative is an aviary system on which experimental research is now being conducted. There are three snags. First, the scrapping of the battery cages and their replacement with aviaries would cost hundreds of thousands of pounds and take some years.

Secondly, no one knows whether the 50 million hens which have grown up in battery cages would be able to adapt to aviaries; and third, cost of production and therefore of the prices of eggs in the shops would rise.

Most of the evidence shows that few housewives would be prepared to pay more for eggs produced under more humane conditions. All the witnesses at the select committee agreed that it would be wrong to ban the battery cage in Britain, while still allowing imports of eggs produced in battery cages in other countries.

Restriction on such imports from European Community countries would fall foul of the Common Market rules and it is likely that the select committee will recommend that the Government should seek changes in welfare legislation on a European basis.

The problem of competing imports also looks likely to bedevil decisions on veal calves, although the evidence is overwhelmingly in favour of scrapping the 'crated' system in which the calf lives in solitary confinement

in favour of the 'loose-house' system. Under this system, the calves live in groups of about 40, have free access to supplies of milk and water and can consume roughage and ruminate.

Not only does this meet ethical welfare requirements but the costs of production are half what they are under the old method. After visiting commercial veal farms on the Continent earlier this year Sir William Elliott gave up eating veal.

However, very little veal is produced and consumed in Britain. Most baby calves are exported to the Continent, where they are kept in crates in which they can hardly move, live on a restricted diet, often in darkness and made to drink their own urine, so as to ensure the whiteness of the meat. The veal produced from these calves is then exported back to Britain.

Under EEC rules there could be no prohibition of export of the baby calves

from Britain, nor export of the veal from EEC countries. One solution would be transport of animals to slaughter below age, although attempts to prohibit export of all live animals for slaughter have been rejected by British Government.

The calves brought to maturity in Britain and the veal thus satisfying welfare considerations and employment opportunities.