

## Cage-free egg project under way in Winthrop

By Associated Press

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WINTHROP, Maine - A retrofitted henhouse that provides chickens a cage-free environment is up and running in a pilot project to produce millions of cage-free eggs for New England consumers.

The henhouse at Dorothy Egg Farms is longer than a football field and looks like a pulsating, moving brown carpet of chickens -- 20,000 of which were brought here three weeks ago.

In a joint venture with Dorothy Egg Farms, Radlo Foods LLC of Watertown, spent hundreds of thousands of dollars to rip out wire cages that once housed more than 80,000 birds. In this new environment, the birds are able to roam, and wood roosts and scratch pads made from artificial turf simulate barnyard conditions.

This is the first large-scale conversion of a conventional henhouse in Maine, according to Radlo Foods.

Commodity egg farms typically have millions of birds that live in stacked narrow cages, which has led animal-rights activists to put pressure on both producers and supermarkets.

In response, many of the nation's big egg producers have adopted new care guidelines, such as having more cage

space and better food, water and ventilation. Eggs that meet these standards are sold in cartons with a check-mark seal from the United Egg Producers.

Cage-free is just a tiny slice of Maine's \$61 million a year egg industry, but sales are growing at a double-digit pace. Demand for the certified eggs is growing so fast that Radlo and Dorothy plan to convert a second conventional chicken house to a cage-free one.

"The way the trend is going, you're going to see a lot more of this," said David Radlo, the company's president and chief executive officer.

The eggs will be sold under the Radlo's Born Free and Eggland's Best brands for \$2.99 a dozen at Shaw's, nearly double the price of a dozen large store-brand eggs that sell for \$1.69.

"It costs a lot more to put chickens in a house, rather than an apartment complex," Radlo said. "But if the market wants it, we're going to produce it."