



**Spent Layers: A Valuable Resource?**  
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Introduction

Approximately 75 billion eggs will be produced from 280 million laying hens in the United States in 2004. Spent hens are usually between 2 to 3 years of age and are laying hens that have reached the end of their laying cycle. Each year, about 50% of these laying hens are disposed of by means of rendering or fowl processing. Due to the age, fragileness and lack of meat on a spent hen, disposal has become increasingly more difficult and expensive.

History

History shows that spent hen meat was primarily used as an ingredient in soups. For many years, Campbells' and Stouffers were the major buyers and users of spent hen meat. However, because the bones are so fragile and a 3 lb. laying hen only has about six ounces of edible white meat, the processing is more difficult and expensive compared with the broiler processing. Hence, Campbells' and Stouffers stopped buying spent hens and now rely on broiler meat for their soups. Other methods of disposal in the past such as burial and incineration are no longer feasible for environmental reasons. Due to losing market options, the U.S. government purchase programs for school lunch, military and prisons have become the largest single buyer of spent hen meat.

<b>U.S.D.A. School Year - Fowl Purchases</b>					
July – June (In Pounds)					
	<u>Canned</u>	<u>Diced</u>	<u>Total</u>	Est. Total <u>%</u>	<u>Light Hens</u>
SY 1999/2000					
Light Hen	7,621,556	6,544,867	14,166,423	52.3	27,243,000
Heavy Hen	2,025,211	10,906,019	12,931,230	47.7	
SY 2000/2001					
Light Hen	7,268,555	7,357,195	14,625,750	62.3	28,126,000
Heavy Hen	504,370	8,345,361	8,849,731	37.7	
SY 2001/2002					
Light Hen	9,239,215	10,457,755	19,696,970	69.1	37,879,000
Heavy Hen	1,259,155	7,540,959	8,800,114	30.9	
SY 2002/2003					
Light Hen	7,766,882	8,986,912	16,753,794	67.0	32,219,000
Heavy Hen	2,160,697	6,079,930	8,240,627	33.0	
SY 2003/2004					

Light Hen	7,590,545	1,500,970	9,091,515	62.0	17,484,000
Heavy Hen	881,481	4,691,580	5,573,061	38.0	

### Future Options or Markets

Rendering of spent hens has increased in recent years to produce a by-product meal for animal agriculture and even pet food. Great Plains Protein and Natural Recycled Proteins have become viable market options using the entire spent hen, including feathers. American Egg Board funded two research projects trying to find new uses. One of the research projects focused on finding new methods for recovering fowl meat with improved composition and functionality while the other project focused on utilizing spent hens as a flavoring base. Illinois State University is currently developing an environmentally responsible and economically feasible manner to dispose of animal carcasses and waste using a propane-fueled, production-scale, on-site thermal destruction system that can be mobile.

### Conclusion

As current spent hen markets continue to decline and ultimately are eliminated, associations and industry need to work together to find economical, feasible and realistic new options for spent layers to make them a valuable resource once again. Short-term and long-term options should be explored and communication will be vitally important in the future.