

Abbey says it exceeds guidelines for hens

CHARLESTON, S.C. – Mepkin Abbey in Moncks Corner has released a statement saying the Trappist order meets and exceeds guidelines for egg production in the United States.

The statement came after People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals Feb. 20 accused the order of torturing its laying hens. On its Web site PETA posted a video of the abbey's farm, taken without the monks' knowledge, and written accusations of mistreatment.

The abbey does not need to defend itself against claims of inhumane treatment of its laying hens, according to Mary Jeffcoat, spokeswoman for the monastery. In a phone interview Feb. 22, she told The Catholic Miscellany, newspaper of the Charleston Diocese, that the accusation by PETA is puzzling.

"Mepkin Abbey is a member of the United Egg Producers and the membership of that association accounts for over 80 percent of eggs produced in the United States," she said. "Mepkin has been certified as following every single guideline established. I'm in a quandary as to why PETA would pick on one, small egg producer as opposed to a national organization.

"Mepkin comes up to a minimum of national standards and, in some ways, goes beyond that. That's why it's puzzling to us as to why Mepkin is being singled out," she said.

National and local media have inundated the contemplative order, known locally for its active conservation efforts, for interviews. Ms. Jeffcoat said she has been asked by reporters if the abbey is going to enter into any discussions with PETA.

"No," she said. "We are not interested in dialogue with people who stoop to those tactics and who are not interested in dialogue. Clearly, as Abbot Stan said in The New York Times, the monks do not believe they are abusing those birds, and we are not going to get into a debate about this in the media."

Ms. Jeffcoat was referring to a New York Times interview with Mepkin Abbot Stanislaus Gumula, who called the allegations “unfactual.”

PETA stated on its Web site that “a PETA investigator visited Mepkin Abbey in January 2007 to see if the flowery descriptions of the abbey’s ‘animal husbandry’ were accurate. We were hoping that devout Christians would not inflict on birds the kind of abuse that the egg industry has become infamous for, such as cutting part of the beaks off hens and cramming birds into tiny wire cages, where – because they aren’t given any space to move around – their muscles waste away and their bones become weak.”

In a Feb. 21 statement posted on the abbey’s Web site, www.mepkinabbey.org, Abbot Gumula said that PETA filmed some of the brothers at the abbey without the monastery’s knowledge or permission.

The abbot said that Mepkin Abbey follows all the guidelines of the Scientific Advisory Committee and United Egg Producers. They cover cage space requirements, proper handling, transportation, molting practices, beak trimming and euthanasia.

“It has always been Mepkin Abbey’s purpose to provide the healthiest environment for our chickens, to treat them as one of God’s precious creatures and to offer to consumers the best possible product for their health and enjoyment,” Abbot Gumula said in the statement.

“That is precisely why we moved to the cage arrangement over 30 years ago, and why we have continued with it to the present,” he said. “Cages provide hens protection from predators, soil-borne diseases and diseases that are caused from walking in litter or waste. We stand by our product and by the commitment we make to our customers as stated on the inner cover of our egg carton.”

Ms. Jeffcoat said that the egg sales make up about 60 percent of the abbey’s annual earned income bringing in about \$140,000 a year, which goes to support the monastery grounds and the monk’s daily needs. The money is also used for building expenses and making the property available to the public. The laying hens produce about 9 million eggs each year and the eggs are delivered to area grocery stores. The monks also operate a retreat program and gift shop and sell compost.

Quoted in The New York Times, Abbot Gumula said, “This hurts so much. They’re happy chickens. They’re being treated nicely.”