

## Adequate stocking density for laying hens in cage-free systems

### Problem

Laying hens in cage-free systems may be housed at high stocking densities to compensate for potential economic losses during the transition phase to cage-free housing systems. However, if too many laying hens are kept in an extremely limited area, they are not able to (fully) engage in natural behaviours, even in non-cage housing systems.

### Solution

The maximum stocking density for laying hens must not exceed 9 hens/m<sup>2</sup> (barn, free-range) or 6 hens/m<sup>2</sup> (organic systems) usable area in the hen house as required by EU law. Lower stocking densities can be considered to reduce the risk of feather pecking.

### Benefits

Adequate stocking densities reduce the risk of feather pecking by enabling the laying hens to perform natural behaviours. This improves hen welfare, including health. It also increases economic benefits for the farmer (lower mortality rates).

### Practical recommendations

The maximum number of laying hens that can be kept in a given housing system on a given farm according to the legal requirements (barn, free-range: 9 hens/m<sup>2</sup>; organic systems: 6 hens/m<sup>2</sup>) can usually be found in the construction documents of this system, which are provided by the housing equipment company. This number must be considered when ordering new hens. Practical experiences indicate that stocking densities lower than determined by law (< 9 hens/m<sup>2</sup>) reduce the risk of feather pecking. By reducing losses due to feather pecking, these lower stocking densities can also be economically profitable.

#### APPLICABILITY BOX

**Theme**

Animal husbandry

**Keywords**

Laying hen, space requirement, housing

**Context**

Transition to and operating non-cage housing systems for laying hens

**Best in**

All non-cage housing systems for laying hens: barn, free range and organic production

**Target audience**

Farmers, farm advisors



Figure 1: A – Laying hens in a barn kept at adequate stocking density (9hens/m<sup>2</sup>). B – Covered veranda with normal stock density. C - Abnormal density. (Source: Fair Poultry)

## On-farm application

### System approach

- Adequate stocking densities always need to be combined with an adequate dimensioning of other resources (e.g. adequate feeder space, perch length or nest area).

## Further information

### Weblinks

Council Directive 1999/74/EC; indoor stocking density barn, free-range: article 4.4 <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=celex%3A31999L0074>

Commission implementing regulation (EU) 2020/464; indoor stocking density organic production: annex IV, 3. <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:32020R0464&from=EN>

Hennovation: Guidelines Feather Pecking; stocking density p. 21

[https://www.fawec.org/media/com\\_lazypdf/pdf/Guidelines\\_Feather\\_Pecking.pdf](https://www.fawec.org/media/com_lazypdf/pdf/Guidelines_Feather_Pecking.pdf)

## About this practice abstract and Best Practice Hens

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**Best Practice Hens:** To support egg production in non-cage systems and improve animal welfare, a consortium consisting of 7 partners will develop Best Practices for Non-cage Egg Production Systems as a European Commission, DG SANTE pilot project. These Best Practices will provide practical support to egg producers to encourage them to convert from cage to non-cage systems, including organic production.

**Project website:** [www.bestpracticehens.eu/](http://www.bestpracticehens.eu/)

**Social media:** Facebook and LinkedIn (@bestpracticehens) & Twitter (@BestHens)

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