

Free-range access for laying hens – Part 2

Problem

One of the main problems in transitioning to systems with outdoor access is management change, mainly in the outdoor area.

Solution

The outdoor area should be a fundamental part of the housing system. Its proper management will depend on the practical application and integration of knowledge of animal behaviour, animal husbandry, agronomy, and natural resource management adapted for each context.

Benefits

Production systems with outdoor access manage an integrated system, directly linking animal production, landscape, and society, usually rural. Besides, they are recognised as offering high levels of animal welfare. Good outdoor management supports landscape diversification, promotes biodiversity, increases animal welfare and health, and contributes to a more sustainable production system.

Practical recommendations

1. Open-air areas for birds shall be covered mainly with vegetation. The rotation of the outdoor plot planning is essential to promote access to new foraging areas, guarantee good pasture and soil management, and offer rest times to the plots. It is also imperative at a sanitary level.
2. Enrich the outdoor area as a “jungle” to prevent pullets and hens’ attacks and promote natural chicken behaviour. It is also recommended to cross ropes in some outdoor areas and hook up some materials that reflect sunlight to make the viewing area of the bird of prey more difficult. In the case of mammals, an electrified fence. The presence of a shepherd dog is also advisable in both cases. There seems to be a higher range of use in small and medium-sized flocks (< 9000 hens, in organic, no more than 3000 hens per flock).
3. Promote pecking behaviour and *See Practice Abstract on Enrichment for pullets and hens*. Take note that additional feed should be only allowed in the covered veranda.
4. Faeces monitoring worms and coccidiosis should be implemented as a management practice at regular intervals and considered to supply diatomaceous earth in the diet to reduce worm and parasite burdens in organic systems.
5. Considerers include a covered veranda to avoid risks of contact with wild birds and their droppings (health reasons) or for long periods of unfavourable weather conditions.
6. Considerers use mobile houses as a practice to integrate the animals into the farms’ ecosystems.

APPLICABILITY BOX

Theme

Animal husbandry, Farm management

Keywords

Free-range, organic production, animal health and welfare

Context

Transition to and operate on free-range and organic systems for laying hens

Best in

Free-range and organic systems

Target audience

Farmers and advisors

On-farm application

System approach

- Adopt a frequent and regular daily routine of the pullets and hens, environment, and automated systems to detect potential problems early. Create a routine checklist. See *Practice Abstract on Inspection and stockmanship for laying hens and pullets*.
- Examples of some requirements for organic production:
 - Land associated is needed to produce their feed (from 1 January 2023, at least 30%) and access to an open-air area for at least one-third of their life
 - Pullets
 - Stocking density per m² in the indoor area of the poultry house is 21 kg live weight/m², and a minimum of 1 m² per pullet in the outdoor.
 - Any combination of perches or raised sitting levels or both providing a minimum 10 cm perch/bird or a minimum 100 cm² raised sitting level/bird
 - Laying Hens
 - Organic
 - Maximum 6 birds per m² in the indoor area/poultry house, and a minimum of 4 m²/bird in the outdoor. In free-range, have a maximum of 9 hens/ m²
 - Minimum 18 cm perch/bird. In free-range, have a maximum of 15 cm perch/bird.
 - 7 laying hens per nest or, in the case of the common nest, 120 cm²/ laying hen

Evaluation

- See Practice Abstract on welfare assessment learn how to care out a self-assessment on welfare indicators and guarantee high welfare and health on your farm.
- If you opt for organic production, the farm will receive annual audits to supervise and analyse compliance with European regulations and thus receive the guarantee certificate.

Further information

Further readings

Practice Abstract on Offer free-range access to get high levels of laying hen welfare - Part 1: <https://bestpracticehens.eu/wp-content/uploads/2022/10/13-free-range-1>

Information about the requirements for the organic system – Commission implementing regulation (EU) 2020/464 and EU Regulation 2018/848, 1235/2008, and 834/2007.

Free-range should satisfy the conditions listed in Art. 4 of Directive 1999/74/EC and Annex II of Regulation (EC) No 589/2008

Weblinks

Organic production Platform hosts a wide range of practical knowledge and tools: <https://organic-farmknowledge.org/>.

About this practice abstract and Best Practice Hens

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www.ecovalia.org

Authors: Mariana Yuan R Couto & Ángela Morell Pérez

Editors: , Mona F. Giersberg & T. Bas Rodenburg

Project coordinator: Prof. T. Bas Rodenburg, Utrecht University
(UU), Yalelaan 2, 3584 CM Utrecht, t.b.rodenburg@uu.nl

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/

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