

Free-range access for laying hens – Part 1

Problem

Free-range housing systems require a different management compared to indoor systems. The transition phase to free-range and a possible lack of experience of the farmer can put pressure on production results.

Solution

Stocking densities should be adjusted to the farm's potential to provide the best animal welfare and health. Good knowledge of the natural behaviour of hens helps identify health, welfare, and production problems early. Need for a holistic approach and proactive management.

Benefits

Have a differentiated production system entirely in line with consumer demand, a high level of animal welfare, a good future, and market-oriented production.

Depending on the local market, it may be more viable for farmers to switch to organic production than to a barn system. Besides, in the face of global needs and climate change, it is a sustainable production system with less input dependency and respects ecosystem cycles as much as possible.

Practical recommendations

1. Have the necessary skills in good management procedures and understanding the welfare of pullets and laying hens, including health and behavioural needs. *See Practice Abstract Training of farmer and staff.*
2. The work schedules should be adapted to the needs of the birds.
3. More systematization and automatization are recommended for larger housing systems with higher production rates. The design of the facilities will vary depending on the final approach of the farm project.
4. Ensure that the farm design allows easy access to outdoor spaces, provides access to natural light linked with a uniformed lighting design and guarantees a continuous night-time rest period of at least 8 hours, adequate temperature and ventilation.
5. Considerers include a covered veranda. *See Practice Abstract on Covered Veranda.*
6. In organic production it is necessary to have land associated to produce their feed (from 1 January 2023, at least 30%).
7. Apply an effective biosecurity protocol to prevent infections and design a good vaccination program. Ensure that the veterinarian and farm advisor have experience in outdoor systems for better advice. *See Practice Abstract Laying hen health and pullet health.*

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

8. Depending on farm size, stocking density and marketing channels, consider selecting appropriate genetics considering behavioural differences. See *Practice Abstract BPH Choice of genetics*.
9. Provide a pullet rearing system as similar as possible to the later housing system for layers. In the case of different systems, more work and training of farmers and staff will be required.



Figure 1 (left): Laying hens in an open-air park with good cover and forage diversity. (Source: Best Practice Hens).
Figure 2 (right): Hens reared in wooden houses in remote rural areas and adapted to the landscape. (Source: UlleCo farms, Spain).

Further information

Further readings

See Practice Abstract on Free-range access - Part 2: <https://bestpracticehens.eu/wp-content/uploads/2022/11/13-free-range-B.pdf>

See all Practice Abstracts published by Best Practice Hens, which compiles all Best Practices for cage-free housing systems.

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

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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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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