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Review of the Canadian Organic Standards

OFC invited all members of the Poultry Taskforce to share their opinions on the issue of the outdoor access for poultry. Although the people Janet Wallace interviewed had different views on this issue, everyone agreed that the welfare of organic birds is critically important. The question boils down to finding what's best for the birds yet also practical for large-scale farmers.

Fresh air for organic poultry?



By Janet Wallace

Does an organic chicken need to be able to go outside?

The simple answer is yes. The Canadian organic standard clearly states that livestock, including poultry, have *“living conditions that accommodate the health and natural behaviour of animals, including access to the outdoors, shade, shelter, rotational pasture, exercise areas, fresh air and daylight, suitable for the species and stage of production taking into consideration the climate and the environment”* (6.7.1a). But what does this really mean?

Does this apply to pullets (immature hens) as well as laying hens? Do the birds need to be outside or just have the choice to leave the barn? How can farmers encourage their birds to go outside?

When should chickens go outside?

“I love seeing my birds outside,” says [Mike Froese](#) of 5 Mile Farms, “but only when it’s good for the birds.”

“I only like seeing them outside when they have been properly vaccinated,” he continues. “Then they have enough defences to stay healthy and to live. It's not appropriate to let the birds outside when it's cold and rainy, or when they are babies.”

Froese has a layer-pullet operation in central Camrose, Alberta. He raises 20,000 layers a year in barns with “lots of windows to let light in and lots of popholes to let the birds go outside.”



“There are some really nasty diseases that affect the birds, like bronchitis and coccidiosis,” Froese explains.

“They can wipe out 100% of the flock; this is why we vaccinate. Every defense that we can give a bird is good.”

Froese vaccinates the pullets about eight times ending when the pullets are 15-17 weeks old. Then he moves the birds from the pullet to the layer barn. They start laying by 19 weeks of age. It can take, Froese says, 5-6 weeks for the birds to get accustomed to the new barn. The birds can go outside when they are 24-25 weeks old.

[Gerald Poechman](#) agrees that pullets should remain inside because “exposure to any new challenges while the vaccines are ‘settling in’ jeopardizes their effectiveness. There are so few days during their ‘okay’ period that the irregular interruption causes undo stress.”

In Europe, however, most organic standards require that pullets, at least older pullets, have access to the outside.

Another potential risk to outdoor access is Avian flu. Last year, wild geese landed in the pasture next to [Serge Lefebvre’s](#) poultry barns in Quebec. Wild waterfowl can carry Avian flu so Lefebvre kept his birds inside while the geese were present. He raises 60,000 layers a year (5000 per barn) in his organic pullet-layer operation, as well as 60,000 non-organic free-run layers. If Avian flu hit, he says, all of the birds would have to be killed, along with his neighbour’s 200,000 layers. Other farmers, however, feel that the risk of Avian flu is exaggerated and recommend planting trees on the range to deter waterfowl from landing.

Brandy Street, however, feels it’s important for pullets and hens to go outside. Street is the manager of SPCA Certified and the farm programs of the [BC SPCA](#). Outdoor access, she says “allows birds more opportunities to express important natural behaviours that they are not always able to express indoors, for example dust bathing, exploring, and scratching and

foraging for food like bugs, worms, plant life. They also have access to fresh air, natural daylight and more open space for stretching and exercising, all of which contribute to good health.” Outdoor access also reduces the incidence of feather picking.



To strengthen the immune systems of growing birds, organic farmers can provide probiotics (yogurt, compost tea or commercial products), add compost to the bedding, feed fermented corn cobs, or allow a few mature birds to mingle with pullets (Bestman, 2004).

At [Sunworks Farm](#) in central Alberta, Ron Hamilton lets his broilers out as soon as they are fully feathered (3.5-4 weeks old). For layers, he gets chicks in May, raises them inside and puts them outside the following spring. His broilers and layers are outside “24/7” from late April until early October in chicken tractors which are moved daily. With 5000 layers a year, he says he has a small operation compared to others. (Sunworks produces organic eggs, broilers, turkeys, waterfowl, pork and beef.)

Encouraging birds to go outside

The Canadian Organic Standards require that at least some of the birds go outside, not just have access to it. Outdoor areas must “show signs of use as appropriate for the season” (6.13.1c4). Several members of the poultry taskforce expressed concern that on the large farms, even though there are pop-holes to allow outdoor access, most birds don’t leave the barn.

“It’s good for animals to go outside and explore if they choose to go outside,” Mike Edwards says. When the more assertive birds leave the barn, the timid birds have more space inside and more opportunity to get to the feeders and the waterers.

All organic standards require that livestock have access to shade and most stipulate that shelter is provided on the organic poultry range. In the UK, the Soil Association’s organic standards require “enough cover in the free-range areas to imitate their native habitat and encourage them to range fully. This can be either natural (such as trees, shrubs and cover crops) and/or artificial (such as screens and trailers).”

“If birds aren't going out,” says Mike Edwards, “the operator should encourage them. They can create a safe environment, provide green space and perhaps have shrubs or other places where they birds can hide and get shade.”

Much as he loves to see his birds outside, Froese is cautious. Last year, he had to close down one of his barns “because of salmonella that came from the environment.”

Ron Hamilton says “Anything that can be done to entice birds to go outside is good. Shade will encourage birds to go outside.”

“We have lots of pasture and even though there is no shade, the birds go out,” says Mike Froese. “Shade can lead to mice which can bring salmonella into a flock in kill a whole flock.”

Several operators mention that shade is unnecessary because the birds can just come inside the barn to get out of the sun. Also, some feel that providing shade will lead to dead patches of grass, which can lead to mud and an accumulation of feces.

Ron Hamilton however, says “Mobile shade units work.” These structures can be pulled by hand or tractor across a field, thereby avoiding many problems.

Research has showed that birds are more likely to go out on pasture when there is shelter outside. This can be provided by mobile shade units, netting spread over certain areas (which can also be moved), trees and bushes, and even living corn stalks. The shelter not only provides shade but also gives birds a sense of security from predators.

Winter gardens

Gerald Poechman takes what he admits is a radical view. Although Gerald and Marlene Poechman let their birds outside, he doesn't see any benefits to outdoor access other than satisfying consumer demand. He does, however, see many risks, such as exposure to predators, Avian flu and deadly microorganisms. When birds do go outside, he says, they tend to just scratch and destroy the pasture closest to the barn.

Rather than focusing on providing access for a some of the birds for some of the year, Poechman proposes creating a better environment for all the hens year-round.



His solution is a biosecure 'winter garden' covered with a gold-tinted, translucent tarp. "The birds are provided with toys, compost, haybale, gravel, perches, open space, fresh micro-greens, fresh air, and soil for bathing for 360 days of the year."

"The majority of birds access the winter garden daily, as part of a habit," he explains. "They anxiously wait at the door every noon, until the timer opens it."

The CGSB Committee on Organic Agriculture rejected a petition to use winter gardens instead of outdoor access, but many Canadian organic poultry farmers use winter gardens when the birds can't go outside. Some extend the outdoor season and are just open in late fall and early spring. Other farms use them throughout the winter or even year-round. Often the winter garden is between the barn and the outdoors and gives birds a place to get many of the benefits of outdoor access on days when they can't go outside due to inclement weather, risk of Avian flu or other factors. Allowing pullets access to a winter garden may encourage the birds to go outside after they mature.

Economics

Mike Edwards poses the question "Are we putting birds outside for the benefit of the bird or for the market?"

"I think it's important for people to realize that a chicken is not a cow," he continues. Chickens are "jungle fowl and come from a warm environment, unlike cows. And they peck and scratch, but they don't graze."

As a feed nutritionist, every spring Edwards gets calls from people with chicken tractors.



“They look at the temperature in the afternoon so that they decide to put the birds out, not realizing the ground is still cold and wet and the nights are cold.”

Edwards says the chicken tractor model can work, “but if not done well, it can lead to massive mortality.”



Ron Hamilton raises birds the way consumers want -- completely outdoors (for nearly half the year). It has taken him years to refine the chicken tractor model. It works for him but at a cost. His process is very labour-intensive and that is reflected in the price of the eggs.

“The eggs sell at \$6.50-\$7/dozen and all the money ‘goes in my pocket,’” says Ron. The producers who wholesale, he explains, get only \$3.80.

“The big guys are trying to raise enough to export across the country. They’re not making a ton of money and that’s the challenge,” he says.

At one poultry taskforce meeting, a participant suggested that the reason many operators resisted strengthening the standards was because they were focused on just making money. This statement offended many people on the call.

“It's not about the money,” says Mike Froese. “Of course, we need to make a living, but that's not the whole issue.”

“I'd like more people to have access to affordable organic food,” says Mike Edwards. “I don't want to have to charge someone \$50 a chicken. We want organic to be sustainable and provide people with affordable healthy food.”

“I'm a third-generation egg farmer. My great grandfather started egg farming in 1843. There's a lot of egg in our blood,” Froese jokes.

“We’re trying to do our best,” Mike Froese concludes. He made the transition to organic production because with whatever he job he takes on, he wants to do it in the best way possible, and sees that as organics. “I'm so proud of my eggs.”

Underlying the whole debate is the issue of scale. Researchers have found that birds in small flocks (i.e., less than 500 hens) tend to use the outdoor range more than larger flocks (up to 3000 birds) (Zeltner, Hirt & Hauser, 2004). Most European organic standards limit flock size to 3000 birds: currently, the Canadian Organic Standard allows flocks of layers to include up to 10,000 birds. In 2015, a proposal to limit the flock size to 5000 birds was rejected.

Chielo et al (2016) reviewed many studies on the use of range by laying hens and found that the larger the flock, the fewer birds go outside. They also concluded that “Ranging patterns of hens have also been found to be influenced by

- strain differences,
- season and/or weather conditions,
- early outdoor rearing experience,
- age of flock,
- pop-hole availability,
- light intensity in the shed and
- presence of keel bone fractures. Overall, tree cover and artificial shelters have been utilized to attract hens into the range.”

“We are at a crossroads where we can either stay with the status quo,” says Ron Hamilton, “or move forward and again make organics a leader in animal welfare. As the consumer pushes for higher animal welfare, will the commodity groups respond and move their standards to a point that will be higher than organic standards in the next five years?”

“In organic poultry production, do we mimic the American system of a lower animal welfare standard, “he asks “or do we move forward to a much higher animal welfare standard that the Canadian organic consumer wants?”

Conclusion



OR



Compared to egg farmers raising tens of thousands of layers, small-scale diversified organic farms can afford to take more economic risks. They have income from multiple sources: they don’t have all their eggs in one basket. All organic egg farmers support the organic sector as a whole, particularly grain growers, by creating a strong demand for organic feed.

Mainstream agriculture is noted for its message of “Get big or get out,” whereas organic agriculture considered “Small is beautiful” and values diversity. The question is how to maintain

the values of organic farming as organics becomes more mainstream and organic farms become larger and less diversified.

Sources

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