



LIVESTOCK

MOSES ORGANIC FACT SHEET

Organic Poultry Production: Eggs

The market for organic poultry products is strong and growing. Integrating either small-scale or large-scale production into your farm system can be both enjoyable and lucrative. Various direct-to-consumer markets or selling through marketing agencies are options. Contact your marketing agency or explore your market options to accommodate any special production requirements (breeds, feed types, etc) before you begin.

Organic poultry may be grown starting from conventional day-old chicks, ducklings etc. Parent stock need not be organic, so conventional hatcheries may be utilized. Check with your supplier to choose different breeds that lay brown, white or green eggs. Your marketing agency may require a certain breed.

Chicks must be raised organically, including organic feed and housing and treated with only allowed health treatments from the second day of life. If you buy any poultry older than day-old, such as ready-to-lay pullets, they must be documented as certified organic and then treated organically for their entire lives in order to produce organic eggs.

Organic poultry must have access to the outdoors, as seasonally appropriate. Access areas are not mandated to have vegetation providing feed value, as with ruminants. However, access to pasture can be a selling point and is claimed by some to produce healthier birds and better tasting poultry products. Any land the birds have access to must be certified organic (no prohibited materials for three years).

100% certified organic feed is required, and must be either purchased or produced on your own certified organic farm. All agricultural feed products and feed supplements must be organic. This includes secondary ingredients such as soy oil or wheat middlings. Non-agricultural, natural ingredients, such as kelp, grit, calcium, or fishmeal must be approved before use in organic operations. No synthetic preservatives, colors, flowing agents

or dust suppressants are allowed. Feed may not include mammalian or poultry slaughter byproducts. Adding organic flax meal to your ration can increase the presence of Omega 3 fatty acids. FDA approved vitamins and trace minerals are allowed as feed additives. DL-Methionine has been approved as a poultry feed additive for use through October of 2012. Methionine is necessary for proper feather and egg production.

Hormones and antibiotics are not allowed in organic egg production. Medicated feed may not be fed. Health issues should be treated through prevention, as most poultry diseases are very difficult to treat. Cleanliness is the best form of defense in disease management. If necessary, only allowed health treatments should be administered. Healthcare alternatives include homeopathy, probiotics, organic raw milk, herbs, hydrogen peroxide or vinegar in water, or turmeric added to food for coccidiosis. For more information see ATTRA resources.

Farm biosecurity is very important to prevent transfer of diseases; from farm to farm, or from wild birds to domestic, and from one batch of poultry to another. When working with multiple flocks on your farm, move from young to old and not visa-versa. Allow some down-time between flocks so you can clean and sanitize the equipment and facilities.

Vaccines are allowed. Typical vaccines that may be considered include: Newcastle disease, coccidiosis, MG M. gallisepticum and MS M. synoviae. Vaccines may be administered via water, through the air or orally.

Parasite control: Laying hens may show symptoms of lice predation. Lice can be controlled though cleanliness in the hen house, including the use of bleach or lime in nest boxes. Providing dust baths of diatomaceous earth are used by some for lice control.

Cannibalism may be caused by overcrowding or a ration imbalance. Correct these conditions to

reduce the problem. Poultry will peck at bloody spots and will gang up on weak birds. If a bird is injured, it should be isolated from others and allowed to recover.

Predators can be a significant loss factor for small-scale poultry production. Predators can include raccoons, dogs, fox, coyotes, mink, weasels, opossums, rats, and aerial predators including owls and hawks. Poisons are not allowed. Common control methods include live-trapping, tightly constructed facilities to prevent access, electric net fencing, guard animals and flashing lights.

Housing must allow exercise, freedom of movement and reduction of stress. Hens must be provided with natural light. Stationary houses, moveable pens or moveable houses may be used. Layers may not be caged and must have access to the ground or floor. Some egg buyers require housing that allows at least 1.75 square foot of floor space per bird inside the hen house, and 2 square foot per bird outside. Hens enjoy roosting at night. Roosts may be made of wood, plastic or metal. If roosts are used, at least 50% of the henhouse should allow access to the floor to allow scratching.

Bedding must be certified organic if it is something that the poultry will typically consume (i.e. hay or straw). Typical bedding may be wood shavings (not from treated wood), organic corncobs, organic hay or straw, or organic corn fodder.

Physical alterations are allowed as needed to promote the animal's welfare, but must be done in a way that minimizes pain and stress. Alterations may include beak trimming when very young (laying hens), or wing clipping (heirloom turkeys, laying hens).

Careful management is critical to maintain an economically viable laying flock. Management must carefully time the introduction of young pullets for consistent egg supply. Pullets will generally not begin laying eggs until 20 weeks old. Care must be taken to regulate light/dark cycles, warmth, feed ration ingredients and protein percentages to ensure consistent egg production. Many producers find light supplementation in the fall and winter helps maintain a steady egg supply. If supplementation is used, it is best started in early fall when the light is starting to wane. Certifiers require light be no more than 16 hours per day.

Laying hens will often moult after their first laying season, and every year to year and a half after that. The moult will take them out of egg production for 3 to 4 months. Many producers

sell year-old layers as stewing hens and start with new pullets each year. Forced moulting, by denying food, water or light, is not allowed under the National Organic Standards.

Eggs may be collected from traditional, hand-gathered nest boxes or from roll-away nests. Eggs may be fertilized (rooster present) or not. Eggs must be stored at below 50 degrees F. Eggs may be cleaned with cleansers, using water that is at least 10 degrees warmer than the eggs, as long as the cleanser residue has been rinsed off the eggs with potable water. Organic standards allow re-use egg cartons, but they must be from organic eggs. Some states or marketing venues do not allow re-use of cartons.

Documentation. Records must be kept on: source of poultry, feed and supplement use and sources, use and source of any health products, vaccinations, mortalities, outside access, house sanitation practices between flocks, and sale of finished product. An audit trail is necessary to show conformation with the National Organic Standards.

Certification. Any operation selling \$5,000 or more in organic product per year must be certified. You must contact an independent third party certification agency, fill out a farm plan, and have an annual inspection. For more information see the MOSES "Guidebook for Organic Certification" or fact sheet series on certification.

Marketing. Those that receive certification from an accredited certifying agency may label their poultry as "certified organic." Labeling and packaging must meet organic and state labeling regulations and list the certifying agency. The USDA organic seal may be used.

More information on small-scale egg production can be found from ATTRA, www.attra.ncat.org, and from the American Pastured Poultry Producers Association, www.appa.org.



The Midwest Organic and Sustainable Education Service (MOSES) provides a variety of resources for farmers interested in organic and sustainable farming. To learn more, please see:

www.mosesorganic.org