

Promoting range use in laying hens

Problem

Consumers expect organic layers to be outdoors. Furthermore, free-range use may improve layer welfare. However, in some farms a low number of hens uses the free range daily.

Solution

Providing a free-range area with varied vegetation and artificial shelters encourages range use. The house should have a covered veranda as smooth transition to outdoors, in order to encourage hens to use the range.

Impact

Providing a covered veranda and more varied structures in the range will encourage hens to go out, while also preventing health problems as well as behavioural problems such as injurious pecking.

Practical recommendation

When designing an organic layer farm, the features and management of the free-range area should encourage the hens to go out more often. This includes:

- **If possible, construct the free range on a dry site, where soil quality can mitigate nutrient leakage.**
- **Use annual rotation of ranges and manage the ground close to the house so that soil can be refreshed for decreasing parasites and excessive nutrients.**
- **Design the housing environments, windows, and light systems so as to minimise the light contrasted between indoor and outdoor areas.**
- **Provide suitable pop holes or other exits from the house so that the covered veranda and the range are easy to access.**
- **Consider providing an attractive covered veranda to encourage the hens to enter this area and to range further from the house in the range area.**
- **Supply vegetation, bushes, and trees in the outdoor range to stimulate the hens to move further away from the house.**
- **If natural shelters are sparse, provide artificial shelters in the range for shade and protection from aerial predators.**
- **Fruit trees and vines are attractive to the hens, which may feed on insects that are harmful to the plants.**

Applicability box

Theme

Animal welfare

Keywords

Laying hens, layer health, layer welfare, consumer expectations, free range, organic

Geographical coverage

Global

Application time

Whole production cycle

Required time

Whole production cycle

Period of impact

Whole production cycle

Equipment

Artificial shelters, bushes, grass seed, trees, veranda



Picture 1: Attractive covered verandas encourage the layers to enter the outdoor range.



Picture 2: Wide pop-holes promote the hens to go outdoor.

Further information

Further readings

- CORE Organic Newsletter 'Role of range use in infections with parasites in laying hens': <https://projects.au.dk/coreorganiccofund/news-and-events/show/artikel/what-is-the-role-of-range-use-for-infections-with-parasites-in-laying-hens/>
- CORE Organic Newsletter 'Range use and plumage condition of two laying hen hybrids in organic egg production': <https://projects.au.dk/coreorganiccofund/news-and-events/show/artikel/finding-the-best-laying-hens-for-organic-farms/>
- CORE Organic Newsletter 'Free range soil: more management, less nutrient levels, better environment': <https://projects.au.dk/coreorganiccofund/news-and-events/show/artikel/free-range-soil-more-management-less-nutrient-levels-better-environment/>

Weblinks

- Check the [Organic Farm Knowledge Platform](#) for more practical recommendations.
- **Project web page:** <https://www.slu.freebirds.se/>

About this practice abstract and FreeBirds

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