



## Welfare standards for organic and 'free-range' chickens and eggs

Consumer concern about the welfare of intensively-produced chickens has led to a huge growth in demand for poultry products from 'welfare-friendly' systems, including 'free-range', 'corn fed', Freedom Food and, of course, organic. With so many labels on offer - each with different prices and welfare claims - it can be confusing to decide which to buy. This paper examines the animal welfare standards for some of the most popular schemes in the UK, in particular, organic farming and non-organic 'free-range' schemes, asking 'what makes an organic bird different from its 'free-range' cousins, and are all chickens with the organic label the same?'

### What does 'free-range' mean?

For chicken meat or eggs to be called 'free-range', it must be produced to standards laid down by EU law. The chickens must be provided with 'access to open-air runs' that are 'mainly covered with vegetation'. Other standards cover how much space chickens have to move around (stocking density), the provision of shelter outdoors for hens laying eggs, and the fact that meat birds must live for at least 56 days (81 days for 'traditional free-range'), see Tables 1 and 2 for more information on this.

These rules offer improvements on standard 'factory farmed' chicken production, where the birds spend all of their lives indoors in battery cages or overcrowded sheds and suffer from a range of welfare problems. To find out more about intensive chicken production visit Compassion in World Farming's [website](#) or read the Soil Association's *Batteries not included* [report](#).

However, the reality of commercial 'free-range' production is often different to the image portrayed. They can be reared semi-intensively in very large flocks which can compromise their health and welfare. While 'free-range' is preferable to caged or 'barn' production, it still falls a long way short of organic farming standards:

- Non-organic 'free-range' chickens can live in very large flocks which compromises their welfare and potentially their health
- Many non-organic 'free-range' chickens do not actually go outside - because of the large number of birds and failure to provide the conditions necessary to encourage the birds to use the outdoor space
- Meat chickens do not have to be provided with shelter in the range area, which may further discourage them from roaming outside
- They have much less space to move around in their houses and outdoors, compared to Soil Association organic chickens - cramped conditions increase stress and the risk of health problems for the birds
- Pasture does not have to be periodically rested, which can reduce access to fresh grass for the birds and increase the risk of diseases building up in the soil
- 'Free-range' hens laying eggs usually have their beaks trimmed to stop them from pecking each other
- 'Free-range' hens can be fed genetically modified (GM) crops like maize and soya.

Strong consumer demand for welfare-friendly poultry products means that there are now 10 million 'free-range' hens in the UK, accounting for one third of all hens and over one quarter of eggs sold (Defra, 2007 and The Ranger, 2006). [1] In fact, 'free-range' egg production is moving towards 'ever-bigger production units' with almost one third of all hens concentrated on just 100 farms, each with over 20,000 birds (ibid).

The Soil Association is concerned that consumers' expectations of free-range chickens are often not matched by the reality of their welfare standards. Research has shown that "a large majority of free-range birds are free-range in name only". A literature review by Elm Farm Research Centre concluded that "many of the birds in free-range poultry production systems do not leave the house" (O'Brien, 2006). Studies have shown that the number of non-organic 'free-range' birds venturing outside at any one time was as low as 12 to 15% of the flock, although 42% of birds were seen ranging in smaller flocks of around 490 birds. Even the birds that do go outside often stay close to their houses since the lack of suitable shelter can discourage greater freedom of movement in the outdoor areas.

Feather pecking can be a particular problem on large egg units and wherever hens are crowded into small spaces. Birds can be seriously injured and even killed as a result. To prevent this, the vast majority of non-organic 'free-range' hens have their beaks trimmed – a mutilation that can be painful and also prevents the hens from expressing their natural behaviour by foraging (Pye-Smith, 2003). Beak-tipping is not allowed to be carried out systematically on any UK organic farms. [2] Like all non-organic livestock, 'free-range' hens can be fed genetically modified (GM) crops like maize and soya, while GM feed is banned for all organic livestock.

### **Are 'Freedom Food' chickens 'free-range'?**

The RSPCA's Freedom Food scheme is a certification system designed to improve the welfare of farm animals. Freedom Food standards allow chickens and other animals to be confined indoors for their entire lives, although they do provide more space and environmental enrichment for indoor chickens, and prohibit battery cages for hens. Buying Freedom Food does not automatically mean you are buying 'free-range'. Some Freedom Food farms do have 'free-range' systems and their standards are similar to the legal EU standards for 'free-range' labelling, outlined below in Tables 1 and 2. There are a number of areas where Freedom Food standards go further than the EU 'free-range' standards, including:

- Encouraging the use of the outdoor space by providing shelter and making recommendations for rotating the land
- Freedom Food chickens have more space than standard 'free-range' birds: hens laying eggs have 10 square metres each in the range area and there is a limit of 12 meat birds per square metre (20 birds for mobile housing)
- Freedom Food standards allow egg laying birds 16,000 per house, but there is no limit on flock size for meat birds (RSPCA, 2006a and 2006b). [3]

Like non-organic 'free-range' standards, the Freedom Food scheme offers some improvements for animal welfare, although they could go much further. According to the Government's Sustainable Development Commission, Freedom Foods standards represent a 'half-way house' compared to organic farming which represents the 'gold standard' (Levitt-Therivell, 2005).

### **'Corn fed' and other labels**

Be careful about misleading labelling - 'barn eggs', 'farm fresh' or 'country fresh' do not mean free-range. More shops are now selling meat from 'corn-fed' chickens due to the perceived enhanced flavour and appearance of the meat, which is yellow in colour. Although there are no legal standards for 'corn fed' chickens, it is commonly understood to mean that they are fed at least 50% corn (maize)

for the fattening period - approximately half - of their lives (Defra, 2006). In contrast to the 'natural' image of corn-fed chickens, they typically live indoors for all of their lives and can be fed on GM corn (maize). Most non-organic eggs carry the Lion Mark and chickens often bear the Red Tractor label indicating that they are produced to Assured Food Standards. These chickens are produced to legal minimum standards and typically spend all of their lives indoors. A study by Compassion in World Farming (CIWF) concluded that these two schemes allow 'intensive and poor welfare' practises including battery cages for hens, overcrowding, routine mutilations like debeaking, as well as the use of inappropriate breeds and feeding which can lead to health and welfare problems (Lymbery, 2002). According to CIWF, "By failing to insist on high welfare husbandry systems, it follows that standard British farm assurance schemes cannot assure high standards of farm animal welfare". Red Tractor chicken standards fulfilled only 5 out of 13 animal welfare criteria whilst Lion Mark eggs scored 4 out of 14. They added, "this compares poorly with the standards set for organic farming by the Soil Association", which achieved 14 out of the 14 welfare criteria for chickens and 13 out of 14 for chickens.

### **How are organic standards different?**

All animals on organic farms live in free-range systems and are encouraged to roam outdoors and express their natural behaviour. Organic standards go further than the requirements for 'free-range' chickens, as outlined in Tables 1 and 2. All organic chickens are fed on a diet rich in organic cereals, which haven't been produced using pesticides and which is free of GM. Organic chickens can't be given routine doses of antibiotics which weakens an animal's immune system and so increases the reliance on drugs.

Unfortunately not all organic chickens are reared in the same way. The Soil Association insists on higher welfare standards for organic poultry than most other organic certifiers. Choosing a chicken with the Soil Association symbol means that they will have been reared to the following standards:

- The birds are truly free range, spending more of their lives roaming outside
- They are looked after in smaller flocks
- They have better access to fresh grass and air
- They have more space in their houses.

In order to maintain the best possible animal welfare, the Soil Association recommends flock sizes of no more than 500 birds. Where farmers can demonstrate high levels of welfare, up to 1,000 meat birds are allowed in a house, or 2,000 for egg laying birds. In contrast, non-Soil Association chickens reared to the current EU rules often live in huge flocks – with as many as 9,000 birds in a single shed – and are then sold as organic. [4] In larger flocks, the sheer volume of birds means that some chickens won't even see or be able to get to the pop holes leading to the range area and so will never go outside. Many experts believe that keeping flock sizes small helps to reduce the risk of serious suffering for chickens, caused in part by the birds getting bored and pecking each other's feathers, causing bleeding and even death. Chickens don't tend to like wide open spaces as they are fearful of the threat of predators. Trees, hedges and artificial shelters on the range area can all help to encourage birds to make better use of the pasture available to them. Soil Association standards require that chickens have enough cover in their free range areas to imitate their natural habitat and encourage them to range fully. From January 2008, Soil Association standards will require at least 4 square metres of shelter on the range for every 500 birds.

Soil Association organic chickens also have much more fresh pasture than any other chickens. Farm chickens like to run around, scratch and feed in their surroundings so a fresh area for them to forage is vital to their health. If hens are kept in large numbers, the ground can become bare and can, after a while, harbour diseases. To prevent these problems, the ground needs to be rested. General organic standards for meat birds require that the land be rested, usually for two months a year. The Soil Association requires this as well as a year's rest after every three years. In addition, nearly all Soil

Association meat flocks are in mobile houses, moved every few months, to give the birds fresh grass and prevent diseases building up in the soil. For chickens laying eggs on Soil Association farms, the land must be rested for nine months, whereas the basic UK standards require only two months. In contrast, non-organic ‘free-range’ farms do not require the land be rested at all. This can lead to a build-up of toxins in the soil and poor grass quality, resulting in the birds not wanting to go outside at all.

**Insist on welfare**

Because Soil Association organic farmers have to go even further, it costs them more to raise their chickens. Currently only 30% of organic chicken meat and 7% of organic eggs in the UK are Soil Association certified. This is because some supermarkets choose to stock cheaper ‘organic’ chickens and eggs, but this lower price carries costs in terms of animal welfare.

To help improve animal welfare standards, choose Soil Association certified chicken and eggs. Other organic certifiers with similar high standards include the Biodynamic Agriculture Association (Demeter) and the Scottish Organic Producers Association (SOPA) – so look out for their certified chicken and eggs as well. You can buy them from independent retailers, box schemes or farmers' markets. To find one near you visit [www.soilassociation.org/directory](http://www.soilassociation.org/directory) You can find Soil Association certified chickens and eggs in the following supermarkets across the country. If your local shop doesn't stock them already, encourage them to sell Soil Association certified organic chicken and eggs. A list of suppliers is available by contacting the Soil Association or online at [www.soilassociation.org/chickens](http://www.soilassociation.org/chickens)

<b>Chicken Meat</b>	<b>Eggs</b>
Sainsbury's	Waitrose
Somerfield	Fresh & Wild
Morisons	Planet Organic
Budgens	
Fresh & Wild	
Planet Organic	

Even though the standards of the Soil Association and these certifiers are ahead of the rest, there is still more that can be done to improve welfare. That's why the Soil Association is using a new system developed by experts at the University of Bristol to monitor and improve the welfare of farm animals. The Soil Association is the only organic certifier to insist on additional welfare inspections for livestock farms.

**Table 1 Comparison of standards for organic and 'free-range' chickens - poultry meat**

	<b>Soil Association <sup>i</sup></b>	<b>Other organic certifiers</b>	<b>Free-range <sup>v</sup></b>
<b>Flock size</b>	1,000 birds (500 recommended) <sup>ii</sup>	4,800 birds, but can be as many as 9,000	No limit (typically several thousand)
<b>Fresh grass (resting pasture)</b>	At least 2 months a year + an extra year in every three	At least 2 months a year	No requirement for resting land
<b>Time spent roaming outside (outside access)</b>	At least 2/3 of lifetime	At least 1/3 of lifetime	At least ½ of lifetime
<b>Space to move around in house (stocking density)</b>	10 birds/m <sup>2</sup> (16/m <sup>2</sup> in mobile housing)	10-16 birds/m <sup>2</sup> . But can be as many as 13-20/m <sup>2</sup> <sup>iv</sup>	13 birds/m <sup>2</sup>
<b>Space outside</b>	4 m <sup>2</sup> / bird	4 m <sup>2</sup> / bird	1 m <sup>2</sup> / bird
Other standards			
<b>Shelter in range area</b>	Yes	Yes	No
<b>Age at slaughter</b>	81 days <sup>iii</sup>	81 days <sup>iii</sup>	56 days

i. BDAA and SOPA have similar standards to the Soil Association

ii. 1,000 birds allowed where farmers can show high levels of welfare

iii. Unless they use a slow-growing strain

iv. Derogation allows limitless stocking density, so these are based on the EU legal upper limit for free-range chickens

v. Additional standards exist for 'traditional free-range' chickens, although they are rare in the UK: 4,800 flock size, 81 day slaughter age, 2m<sup>2</sup> space per bird outside, and indoor stocking density of 12 birds per m<sup>2</sup> (20 for mobile housing).

**Table 2 Comparison of standards for organic and 'free-range' chickens - egg layers**

	<b>Soil Association <sup>i</sup></b>	<b>Other organic certifiers</b>	<b>Free-range</b>
<b>Flock size</b>	2,000 birds (500 recommended) <sup>ii</sup>	3,000 birds, but can be as many as 9,000	No limit (typically several thousand)
<b>Fresh grass (resting pasture)</b>	At least nine months between each batch	At least two months between each batch	No requirement for resting land
<b>Time spent roaming outside (outside access)</b>	All laying life	At least 1/3 of lifetime	Continuous daytime access
<b>Space to move around in house (stocking density)</b>	6 birds/m <sup>2</sup>	6 birds/m <sup>2</sup> . But can be as many as 12/m <sup>2</sup> <sup>iii</sup>	12 birds/m <sup>2</sup>
<b>Space outside</b>	10 m <sup>2</sup> / bird	4 m <sup>2</sup> / bird	4 m <sup>2</sup> / bird (2.5m <sup>2</sup> with rotation)
Other standards			
<b>Shelter in range area</b>	Yes	Yes	Yes
<b>Beak trimming</b>	No	Not routinely	Yes

i. BDAA and SOPA have similar standards to the Soil Association

ii. 2,000 birds allowed where farmers can show high levels of welfare

iii. Derogation allows limitless stocking density, so this are based on the EU legal upper limit for free-range chickens.

Sources: Defra (2005 and 2006a), EU (1993) and Soil Association (2006).

## Footnotes

1. In 2006, there were 24,018,000 cases of eggs were packed in the UK, including 6,540,000 'free-range' cases (27%) and 1,198,000 organic cases (5%)  
<http://statistics.defra.gov.uk/esg/statnot/eggnotce.pdf>
2. Under exceptional circumstances to prevent cannibalism within poultry flocks the Soil Association occasionally gives special permission (a derogation) for beaks to be tipped. In 2006, derogations were issued to six of the Soil Association's 194 egg producers, which represents 3% of our egg laying flocks.
3. The house would have to be subdivided into groups, or colonies, of 4,000 birds.
4. Baseline organic standards have a limit of 3,000 egg layers or 4,800 meat birds per flock, but some large farms take advantage of a temporary relaxation in EU standards which means they can choose the size of the flocks.

## References

- Defra (2005) Explanatory Leaflet on the Production methods for Free Range and Barn eggs marketed under the Egg Marketing Regulations. Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs
- Defra (2006a) *Compendium of UK Organic Standards* . Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs
- Defra (2006b) *What is "corn fed chicken"?* . Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, <http://www.defra.gov.uk/foodrin/poultry/faq/marketing.htm#Corn>
- Defra (2007) *Egg Statistics Notice. February 2007* . Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, <http://statistics.defra.gov.uk/esg/statnot/eggnotce.pdf>
- EU (1993) *Commission Regulation (EEC) No 2891/93 of 21 October 1993 amending Regulation (EEC) No 1538/91 introducing detailed rules for implementing Regulation (EEC) No 1906/90 on certain marketing standards for poultrymeat.*  
[http://europa.eu.int/smartapi/cgi/sga\\_doc?smartapi!celexapi!prod!CELEXnumdoc&lg=EN&numdoc=31993R2891&model=guichett](http://europa.eu.int/smartapi/cgi/sga_doc?smartapi!celexapi!prod!CELEXnumdoc&lg=EN&numdoc=31993R2891&model=guichett)
- Levitt-Therivell (2005) *Sustainability implications of the Little Red Tractor scheme* . Report for the Sustainable Development Commission
- Lymbery P (2002) *Farm Assurance Schemes and Animal Welfare. Can We Trust Them?* Compassion in World Farming Trust [www.ciwf.org.uk/publications/reports/Farm\\_Assurance\\_report\\_04\\_02.pdf](http://www.ciwf.org.uk/publications/reports/Farm_Assurance_report_04_02.pdf)
- O'Brien, J (2006) 'Aspects of poultry behaviour: How free-range is free range?', *Elm Farm Research Centre Bulletin* . Elm Farm Research Centre
- Pye-Smith, C (2003) *Batteries not included. Organic farming and animal welfare* . Soil Association
- RSPCA (2006a) *RSPCA welfare standards for laying chickens* . RSPCA
- RSPCA (2006b) *Welfare standards for laying hens and pullets* . RSPCA
- Soil Association (2005) *Soil Association Organic Standards* . Revision 15. Soil Association
- The Ranger (2006) *Now it's 10 million on range.* 21 November 2006. British Free Range Egg Producers Association  
<http://www.theranger.co.uk/bsp/10130/ews.asp?DBID=103-281-013-010&iPage=1&id=2108>

## Further Reading

Please see the Soil Association website library, <http://www.soilassociation.org/library>, for more information

**Soil Association** Campaigning for organic food and farming and sustainable forestry  
Bristol House, 40-56 Victoria Street, Bristol BS1 6BY  
T: 0117 314 5000 F: 0117 314 5001 E: [info@soilassociation.org](mailto:info@soilassociation.org)  
[www.soilassociation.org](http://www.soilassociation.org)

Version272.2 Draft: