

**THE ROYAL NEW ZEALAND SOCIETY FOR THE  
PREVENTION OF CRUELTY TO ANIMALS**



**WELFARE STANDARDS**

**for**

**FREE RANGE LAYER HENS**

***MINIMUM STANDARDS***

## **SOURCE OF SUPPLY**

Function of the hatchery must be humane; hatcheries are usually more sophisticated but must be monitored to ensure:

- humane management;
- destruction of male chicks must be in accordance with the Code of Recommendations and Minimum Standards for the Welfare of Layer Hens;
- all hatchery waste must be treated so as to kill instantaneously any living embryos. Instantaneous fragmentation and carbon dioxides are accepted methods;
- transportation from the hatchery must be in accordance with the applicable code of welfare.

## **GROWTH PERIOD**

While it would be preferable to source all chickens from parent stock which have been raised in free-range conditions, it is not mandatory at this time. Hens (from chick to layer) are to be raised in circumstances designed to develop natural behaviour. It is important that only suitable breeds of hens are used for free-range egg production. Genetic development of breeds should address suitable temperament as well as health, early bone growth and production capabilities.

- From day old, chicks must be raised on non-chemically treated and natural litter on the floor in a secure, draught proof area.
- Chicks must have access to temperatures initially between 30°C - 37°C, but be allowed the freedom to choose outside conditions as they grow, where shelter is available and the climate is suitable.

## **REGULAR WEIGHING**

During the laying period a sample of more than 20 hens should be weighed on a weekly basis and the weights recorded. There is then a weekly comparison of weights.

## **LAYER PERIOD**

### **Hens must have:**

- freedom and capacity to socialise and escape aggression (caused when hens are not given the right conditions to encourage them to leave the crowded shed);
- freedom to move freely, stretch, perch, nest, dust bathe, flap wings.

## NEST BOXES

- Adequate nests must be provided to accommodate the needs of all hens. [Any more than 2% floor eggs, once full lay is attained, indicates a problem and must trigger investigation in the nest accommodation.]
- Whether nests are flat floored or roll away, the criteria for approval will depend on a high standard of management and husbandry skills being found at audit.
- There should be at least one nest for every seven hens. The minimum internal dimensions for a single nest is recommended at 35cm wide x 35cm deep x 35cm high. For a sloping roof the height at the rear of the nest box can be 52cm.
- It is recommended that in front of the openings to the nests, there should be a ledge 7cm in depth (the full width of the nests), for hens to step onto for easy access into nests. This ledge which is on hinges can then fold upwards allowing easy access to the nests for inspection and cleaning. There should be a clear gap of approximately 28cm between the front of the nest and the 7cm ledge.
- A group nest, which is a single nest for a group of hens, with no partitions, shall have a net area of one square meter, i.e. 1m x 1m or to a minimum of 0.5m x 2m of nest space.
- Where group nests are used, there should be a minimum of one square metre of nest space for a maximum of 56 hens.

## POPHOLES

- Sufficient pop holes must be appropriately distributed around the building to ensure that all birds have ready access to the range. Each pop hole must be at least 450mm high and 1m wide to allow the passage of more than one bird at any one time and must be provided at a minimum of one such pop hole per 600 birds. For sheds with smaller colonies the pop holes can be reduced in size, although they should allow individual birds to pass through the pop hole comfortably.

## PERCHES

- There are two kinds of perch systems acceptable for free range hens: timber perching frames of approximately 50mm x 50mm or a raised wooden slat perch area.
- For wooden perches a minimum of 150mm perch area per hen must be offered.
- For a raised slat area 1 square metre must be offered per 20 hens. The slats must be at least 600mm off the ground.
- For all perching systems the surface must be smooth to avoid foot injuries.

- Perch space other than described above (e.g. rafters) to which the hens have access without danger of injury to themselves or risk of soiling drinkers, feeders and nest boxes should be considered by the Auditor.

## **STOCKING DENSITY**

- Maximum stocking density allowable is 10 hens per square metre of **covered/roofed area**.

## **FEED SYSTEMS**

There are two feeding systems used in free range systems, ad lib and regulated.

- **AD LIB FEEDING:** where feeding is always available. For ad lib feeding, 3.5cm for circular systems and 5cm for rectangular systems per hen feeder space is adequate, since in ad lib systems not all hens will feed at the same time. However, feed hoppers need to be checked and refilled daily.
- **REGULATED FEEDING SYSTEMS:** 10cm of feeding space is required per hen to obtain the required amount of feed. This equals an amount of 5m of a rectangular feeding system per 100 hens where both sides are accessible.

The conditioning of the hens and feeding records should always be taken into consideration, since some producers feed out directly into the litter or grassed range.

The amount of feed consumed must be recorded and monitored on a per flock basis to ensure the hens' requirements are met. The Auditor may advise that producers should weigh representative samples of hens regularly and keep these weights on record, so that they can be compared with relevant breeder standards.

## **DRINKING SYSTEMS**

- Several kinds of systems can be used; however, there is a preference for circular drinking troughs. The more common ones are the trough system either operated by a ball cock or gravity shut off or bell drinker, and the nipple system with drinker lines.
- Drinking space should be sufficient to meet the specifications of the manufacturer, and be adequate in number and position to allow ad lib drinking at all times, even when out in the paddock.
- Hens must have continuous access to water with a minimum of either 10cm of linear drinking trough per hen, or 5cm of circular drinking trough per hen.

## NIPPLE DRINKERS:

- If hens have unrestricted access to a trough which is continually fed via a ball cock and which holds enough water for the flock requirement for one day, the maximum number of hens per nipple drinker should not exceed 25 hens.
- If nipple drinkers are the only water source, the ratio should be no more than 10 hens per nipple drinker.

## BELL DRINKERS

- Standard bell drinkers with a circumference of 120cm are sufficient at a ratio of one bell drinker per 50 hens.
- If hens have unrestricted access to a trough which is continually fed via a ball cock and which holds enough water for the flock requirement for one day, the hen ratio per bell drinker can be increased to 100 hens.

## HEALTH

### Health requirements:

- Adequate and readily available supply of clean water which is not deleterious to the hens' health (tested to meet NZ biological standards at least once a year and results made available to audit).
- Balanced food from a sufficient number of consoles to ensure ready access; **there must not be access to offal.**
- Manure removal on an all in all out basis at depopulation with the sheds being cleaned, disinfected and sanitised before restocking.
- Administration as necessary, subject to veterinary advice, of appropriate vaccinations, prophylactic and corrective medicines. Antibiotics should be used only under veterinary advice for specific illness and not as a growth promotant.
- Careful monitoring and appropriate treatment for worms, lice, mites and other parasites.
- An awareness of plants that could be detrimental to the health of the birds and subsequent control of these plants.
- Clean air within the sheds - ammonia levels to be no higher than 15ppm and dust levels which can be potentially harmful must be kept to an absolute minimum. Dust levels over 3.4mg per cubic metre must trigger corrective action. All ventilation systems must have the ability to prevent the build up of harmful gases, e.g. Ammonia and CO<sub>2</sub>.

- Sufficient waterproof housing. Protection must be provided from rain on birds and litter.
- Temperature monitoring is essential. Free-range farming should not be practised in extreme climates where the hens cannot range freely for most of the year.
- Adequate shelter must be provided from all the elements, and extreme weather. It is recommended 10 shade trees per year be planted where it is appropriate.
- Protection from predators and rodents both in buildings and outside. Predator control systems must be monitored (e.g. bait stations regularly checked) and hens must not have access to baits/traps.
- Outdoors, hens require shade and shelter as protection from hawks.
- Paddocks should be fenced to prevent access by cats and dogs.
- Rotational grazing to allow an adequate rest period for each paddock.
- Friable, dry litter in the sheds. Litter material must not contain toxins (tanalising agents and fungi) or other contaminants, at sufficient levels to cause respiratory and other health problems.
- A minimum depth of litter material should be appropriate to the choice of litter material. At house placement time wood shavings should be 50 – 75mm deep.
- Natural light - with artificial light for fifteen minutes longer than natural daylight to a one light total of 16 hours per day; any extension of the daylight period to be in the morning rather than at night.
- Identification and control of lameness.
- Monitoring and maintenance of proper nutrients in feed. The following is a guide to required nutritional levels.

0 - 8 weeks	19-20% protein - starter
9 - 12 weeks	15-16% protein - grower
13 - 16 weeks	13-14% protein - low density grower
17 - 18 weeks	pre-lay with stone grit and oyster shell or lime stone
17 - 18 weeks	pre-lay with stone grit and oyster shell or lime stone grit provided in separate feed containers.

The objective is to have all chickens reared to the recommended average in the breeder standard or above as early as possible. It is possible that good, early growth and strength lessens the risk of feather pecking in adult hens.

**Note:** A mortality rate of 1% of shed population per month is the maximum allowable. However, this level must trigger diagnostic and corrective action that must be documented. The aim should be a maximum annual loss not exceeding 5% of the initial shed population.

## **MANAGEMENT**

Acceptable and consistent management would require:

- a reliable veterinary arrangement to provide consistent and reliable advice;
- forced moulting is not permitted;
- stock workers to be trained to a high standard by whatever methods available either formally or informally. Courses are available;
- stock workers to be alert to problems (prevention);
- stocking density no greater than 10 hens per square metre in sheds and 350 per acre\*.
- flock/group size - maximum 4,000 hens per enclosure on a minimum of 11.67 acres or 4.72 hectares.\*

The RNZSPCA prefers smaller flock sizes, especially taking into consideration climate and ground conditions.

\*The ratio of 350 hens per acre can only be a guideline, since soil types and weather patterns can vary greatly from farm to farm. The vegetative cover of the land should also be considered by the Auditor as an indicator of a sensible carrying capacity for each farm.

## **BEAK BLUNTING**

The RNZSPCA, after consideration of alternatives, considers beak blunting to be an acceptable practice to avoid cannibalism in flocks. It is accepted that in both Barn and Free Range systems there is considerable risk of outbreaks of cannibalism. The pain and suffering of hens that are being pecked can be appalling. If they are not immediately identified and removed, the problem may quickly affect a considerable proportion of the flock. It is recognised that a number of factors influence feather pecking and cannibalism, including lighting intensity, redirected behaviour, genetic strain, (modern layer hen hybrids have been selectively bred for decades for the exclusive use in intensive cage egg systems) food access, composition and environmental enrichment.

***Producers trialled some flocks without beak blunting with results confirming that unacceptable levels of cannibalism occurred.***

Management and husbandry techniques have a high priority in this area and will be carefully scrutinised at audit.

## **REMOVAL AND SLAUGHTER**

Removal and slaughter must be undertaken by:

- clearing out at night;
- using crates appropriately designed for poultry to minimise injury and maximise comfort, taking only the allowable number of hens for size and in accordance with the Code of Recommendations and Minimum Standards for the Welfare of Layer Hens.
- transport and slaughter by methods as approved in the appropriate welfare codes.

## **RECORDING AND STANDARDS CONTROL**

Suitable records and standards must be maintained for:

- mortality rates, including culls;
- use of veterinarian/s;
- injury and disease numbers
- diagnostic and corrective action must be documented;
- feeding regimes;
- premises and equipment must be thoroughly cleaned and disinfected before restocking to prevent the carry over of disease-causing organisms to incoming birds. A record shall be kept of actions taken and chemicals used in the process;
- other management regimes, such as temperature monitoring, checks for parasites, removal of clucky hens etc.; and
- floor egg numbers.

Access to all records must be available to RNZSPCA Accreditation Officer/s at any reasonable time and is a requirement for Certification. The Animal Care Statement is an integral part of the standards requirement and the RNZSPCA must hold a completed copy. The RNZSPCA guarantees security and confidentiality of the Animal Care Statement provided by the producers.

## **PACKAGING**

An accredited egg package will carry the distinctive SPCA Blue Tick 'accreditation logo' on the outside of the packaging. All artwork on packaging or labels, must be registered and signed off by the RNZSPCA.

RNZSPCA will arrange a pre-accreditation inspection within the first three months of purchase of an existing poultry farm and this will be paid for by the new owners.

**Note:** RNZSPCA standards for egg production will be accompanied by an animal care statement (attached): this identifies areas of responsibility and is, in effect, a routine and crisis management guide.

The animal care statement will act as a checklist for RNZSPCA inspection of farms and is part of this document.

## **APPROVAL OF VARIANCES FROM THE STANDARDS**

The RNZSPCA acknowledges that there may be production variances between individual producers, which are not fully addressed in these standards. The RNZSPCA may at its discretion, therefore, approve variances from these standards for individual producers, subject to confirmation being received from the auditor that there is no compromise to the hens' welfare.