

A Review of Small Organic Egg Farms in the Northeast

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In November of 2002 we distributed a survey of organic egg production and hen health care practices to nearly 100 small farmers in the northeast. This endeavor and the subsequent research and manual on organic layer health care was funded through the USDA-Sustainable Agriculture Research and Education Program (SARE). Under the project "Remedies for Common Health Problems of the Organic Laying Flock (FNE02-415)," we are putting together an *Organic Layer Health Handbook* detailing what organic producers can do to keep their hens in prime health and laying condition. One part of the project was to survey small regional egg producers that may be able to provide useful information for the handbook.

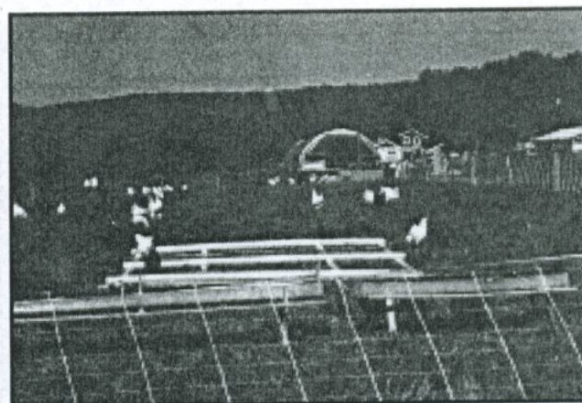
We received a total of 45 surveys from all over the northeast. While limited in their usefulness for the hen health care handbook, these surveys provided a wealth of information on the wide variety of methods used to house and manage small laying flocks. What I would like to present here is a review of the management practices used by these growers so we can see how these practices might contribute to the reported outstanding health of their flocks. The broad categories I will outline are: Overall Management Practices, Housing and Pasture Management, and Feeding Practices.

Overall Management Practices

The majority of the responding farms averages 56 acres and are located in Maine, Vermont, New York, and Massachusetts. Most of these farms are certified organic, although not necessarily the egg operations specifically. Approximately 25% of these farms raise poultry other than layers, mainly broiler chickens and turkeys. Most farms have small, semi-commercial flocks of 150 birds or fewer, although a few with flocks of several hundred are marketing commercially. The most popular breed for all these flocks is the Rhode Island Red, with the Araucana and Plymouth Rock as close seconds. Also used are several varieties of link hybrid, production red hybrids, and a vast array of rare breeds. Most farms raise these birds from purchased chicks, but 12 farms buy in already started pullets. Layers are then kept for quite a range of times. The farms with small flocks tend to keep birds 2-years or "until death," but farms with 100-500 birds cull at 1.5-years. Most farms process these cull birds to sell as soup hens, while others sell them live, compost, or bury them.

Housing Methods and Management

During the growing season most farms report they keep hens in moveable pens with access to pasture. Also common is housing farms with access to a yard or a permanent house with rotating pasture. The quality of pasture given the hens seems to be very good with most farms reporting they use fully managed seeded meadow and grass pasture. A substantial number of others manage their grass pastures, while only a few use only unmanaged grass, woods, woodland, or orchards. Those using unmanaged areas



Permanent house with rotating pasture.

typically have small, free-range flocks. Floor space given within the summer housing varies widely according to flock size, but averages 4.72 square feet per bird. In the winter most farms move their flocks indoors to a barn with a bare yard for outdoor access. Others use hen houses or chicken coops, or greenhouses and hoophouses. Some farms report managing their winter outdoor access by seeding or bedding the yard and others provided none at all (this could be weather related in many snowy areas). Floor space given within the winter housing is also generally generous at an average of 4.62 square feet per bird. More than half of the farms report using a deep litter system in both their winter and summer housing. They utilize this litter system combined with sunlight to heat their winter houses.

Feeding Practices

Nearly all of the responding farms use organic feed, most of them exclusively whether their egg operation is certified or not. Some farms report using a commercial bagged organic feed, but many have it custom mixed or do it themselves. The primary feed supplements other than grain that farms include in their feed are kelp, vitamin packs, fish or crab meal, feeding limestone, flax, and probiotics. A few other farms report adding garlic, yeast, Echinacea, DE, and milk replacer. Most farms also offer a wide range of free-choice supplements, particularly in the winter. These include primarily oyster shell and grit, but also fresh greens, alfalfa, kelp, vegetables, and a variety of herbs to help prevent worms. Many of these farms also have special supplements they use while brooding chicks to help prevent disease and create passive immunity. These include electrolytes, Echinacea, fresh greens/grass, apple cider vinegar, and molasses.

Many of the farms that answered our survey provided important information about how they manage their laying flocks and what their chicken health care needs are. I would like to thank all those who responded. I am currently researching and writing up the Organic Layer Health Handbook which is based on the needs and ideas of the survey respondents and fleshed out by research on grower's practices from around the world. Look for a review and publication information for this handbook by the end of the summer.

Karma, Michael & Rosie operate an incredibly diverse farm in Berkshire, NY.