

Organic Poultry Production Standards

Contributed by gil

gil provides a timely summary of what Organic means in the context of commercial poultry rearing.

1. Introduction

Organic table poultry : what does this mean ?

What do organic farmers do differently from conventional ?

What is and is not acceptable to the Soil Association, the organic certification body with the strictest standards on poultry keeping for both meat and eggs ?

Would you eat organic chicken ?

Would you rather buy conventional but free-range ?

Or locally-produced, or from someone you know with a few birds ?

Do you want to rear your own to be absolutely sure of what you're getting ?

Maybe this article will provide some 'food for thought'.

As some of you will know, I was doing a postgrad course in Organic Farming. This is a revised version of a course assignment, based on a field visit to an organic farm that rears chickens for meat. The original purpose of the visit / assignment was to observe, and report on the production methods used in the poultry enterprise. I have not identified the farm for reasons of confidentiality. Poultry isn't an area I'm familiar with. The visit was an eye-opener.

The poultry enterprise is involved in Company X's 'outsourced' production of organic table poultry, whereby individual farmers contract with Co. X to undertake the rearing of day-old chicks until slaughter at 10 weeks, using a basic system developed by Co. X. The company provides training and an advisory service, and guarantees finance. The farmer provides land, labour and poultry housing, and buys feed and other supplies. This is a diversification from Co. X's existing conventional pig fattening franchise. This farm started rearing table poultry soon after Co. X's move into the poultry business. Co. X is a large food supplier, but not a supermarket, and does not deal exclusively with supermarkets

2. Management of table bird enterprise

2.1 Integration with other farm enterprises

Land use on the farm has varied over the last few years, as the farmer developed a workable organic rotation. In the last two years, the farmer has narrowed his activities down to grass (some occupied rotationally by the poultry enterprise, with the remainder rented out for grazing conventional sheep) and carrots. Despite the national lack of grazing available for finishing organic lambs, the farmer does not want 'the hassle of it'. SA standards advise the use of sheep for sward

management in poultry enterprises, so the sheep do have their uses. SA Standards 20.1.1 require farmers to manage their organic poultry activities so they either integrate into the farm as a whole (i.e. as part of a long crop/livestock rotation), or with other organic farms in the local area, re manure, rotation and feed.

2.2. Marketing policies

The birds are slaughtered at 10 weeks old [= minimum conversion period for a traditional or slow-growing strain, from conventional day-old chick to organic bird, required by SA Standard 20.3.4] at the organically certified facility in the region, well within the travel time specified by the SA ([8 ?] hours from the loading of the first bird on the farm to the unloading of the last at the abattoir). They were originally sold at a city farmers market, but all production is now sold to two supermarkets, and marketed by Co. X under a brand name. The farm is registered organic by the Soil Association (SA) certification agency (CA), and its poultry is labelled as such, in order to benefit from the wide consumer recognition of the SA. The market for organic chicken is expanding rapidly, and Co. X intends to ramp up its overall production from current levels of 5,000 to 15,000 birds/week. At present, the farm produces 600 chickens a week, all year round, which is the batch size around which its production facilities are planned. Co. X is currently trialling batches of 700 birds, which could be reared using the same amount of space [SA Standards 20.7.3 for stocking densities in table poultry housing – 10 birds or 21kg weight/sq.m]. The expected live weight of birds at slaughter is 2.5kg, possibly rising to 2.7 or 2.9kg in summer : more daylight, ranging further, more muscle, eating more.

3. Flock management

3.1. Breeds

The breeds used for organic table bird production are not those used in conventional poultry enterprises (Ross and Cobb). Breeds are specified by Co. X, which prefers to use coloured birds for organic production, perhaps because it is then easier to separate organic from non-organic carcasses, or perhaps because the consumer associates brown birds with a healthier option (in the way that brown eggs are incorrectly perceived as more wholesome). Organic table birds tend to be the slower-growing Continental breeds, such as MasterGris and Colopak, which have a different conformation (body shape, muscle and fat distribution) at maturity : 50% smaller in the breast and twice as heavy in the legs, with a different overall shape, taste and meat texture. The farmer was previously rearing white-feathered 747s, which were easier to see and catch in twilight.

3.2. Rearing policy

It is not yet possible to obtain organic day-old chicks in the UK, and therefore SA standards do not as yet prescribe this, although Co. X want to move towards this situation. The farmer buys his conventionally-produced day-old chicks from Co. X, which sources them mainly from further south, with some from an agricultural college. They are supplied in batches of 600, divided into trays of 90 chicks. At present, there is thought to be over-reliance on a single breeding flock for chicks, and this affects breeding performance, with higher rates of mortality than desirable (currently 9%, double the rate for the first year of operations). Hatching or transport problems cause

most deaths, occurring in the first 48 hours after delivery.

3.3. Batch size

The chickens are reared in cohort batches of 600, first in containers (like very large incubators, not as awful as it sounds) and then in the open field. SA standards [Section 20.7.11] prohibit the keeping of table birds in batches of more than 500 in a single poultry house without special dispensation, and absolutely prohibit batch sizes of more than 1000. So this farm has obtained a dispensation from the SA, on the grounds that its rearing methods are particularly scrupulous in all respects other than batch size, and especially with regard to animal health and welfare. Since the natural size of social group for poultry is apparently between 30 and 50, it is clear that even organic chickens kept under the Co. X system are unlikely to exhibit the natural behaviours of their species. In particular, outdoor ranging is vastly reduced at such high numbers. I thought the chickens looked quite close together, but when you think about conventional factory farming with 35,000 broilers crammed in a shed, these huts are not so bad.

3.4. Range

The birds are kept in arks in the open field, in 30m² parks surrounded by 18" high electric fencing, which keeps most of them in, most of the time. Each park has a couple of wooden pallets for the birds to shelter and play with, to encourage them to range outdoors. This is close to the SA's minimum requirement for poultry production, which would prefer that chickens had natural cover, such as vegetation and trees, and also access to outside dust baths and drinkers. In fact, the farmer is currently trying to lobby the SA to get existing standards regarding grazing space reduced, to make it easier to find birds in a smaller area in the long summer grass. During the visit, in January 2006, many of the chickens were in their arks, which was not surprising, since it was pretty bleak out, and the grass was very short. It would be interesting to see how many of them go out in summer, and what their social patterns are.

3.5. Rations

Chicks are fed starter pellet feed from days 1 to day 21 or 24 (eating approximately 1kg per head over 21 days, and delivering a 3:1 feed conversion rate); then moved on to a compound organic pellet feed for finishers. This is supplied at a rate of 75kg/day per ark of 600 birds, rising to 125kg/day for older chickens. Feed pellets are heat-treated to kill off moulds that could cause respiratory infections. The pellets are bought by Co. X from a supplier in Yorkshire, and the farmer buys them through a producer group with (in theory) more buying power than an individual farmer would have. The chickens also receive home-produced feed made from organic wheat in order to save feed and haulage costs.

Also note that they are being fed mostly concentrated, processed/pelleted feed, with the odd potato chucked in. The only greenstuff they get is what's in the field outdoors. I'd recommend summer chickens, since they will have had a more varied diet.

3.6. Health and welfare

When keeping birds in such close proximity, health and cleanliness are priorities, as infections can spread quickly. Chicks are given live vaccine in their drinking water at 7 days against illnesses such as bronchitis. Continental poultry breeds tend to be less subject to the health problems of conventional Ross/Cobb varieties, such as leg collapse and heart attacks as they approach slaughter weight. Leg problems experienced in organic rearing are usually due to congenital malformation. There are occasional feather-pecking issues, but these often arise from a mineral deficiency in the breed flock, and can sometimes be minimised by providing the birds with potatoes. Feather-pecking was ascribed by the farmer to a mineral deficiency in the breeding flock from which the chicks had been produced, given that there are very few Mastergris / Colopak large-scale breeders, and they all breed from a restricted gene pool.

The birds fight naturally, and some bald patches are expected. Wing-clipping is not practised, although the birds do not range far anyway. The chick containers are predator-proof against rats and foxes, and are easy to clean. Occasional fox problems in the open field are dealt with by shooting, and by shutting all birds in at night, although the farmer is trialling leaving chickens out at night in good weather.

3.7. Housing arrangements

Organic standards require table poultry to have outdoor access for 2/3 of their lives. On this farm, birds range outdoors for just under 70%. For the first 3 weeks of their lives, chicks are kept in 'brooding containers' made out of specially-adapted, lit, heated, insulated and easy-to-clean industrial containers, with drinkers and tube-type feeders running the length of the walls. Water tanks are sited on top of the containers, and pressure-washed in summer to prevent algae build-up. During the first three weeks, chicks experience successively lower temperatures (starting at 31C and reducing to 19C by the end of week 3) as they feather up, grow larger, and approach the time when they will be let outdoors into whatever season obtains. They are also introduced to increased darkness to simulate natural diurnal cycles. This gradual acclimatisation reduces stress and mortality rates when they first go outside. A generator provides power for heat and light, and each container is connected to an alarm system linked to several different individuals' mobile phones, should heat or power fail. At about 21-24 days old, the chicks are moved to arks in the field with daylight hours access to the outdoors, and their container is pressure-washed. Their field ark is kept at 10-15C for the first week. The 7 arks (one per batch/week) are wooden and unfloored, can open on one or both sides, and are moved to fresh ground after each batch of birds. Each ark has 2 drinking lines and 6 feed stations. Clean straw is provided weekly, and there is constant air movement. Both the containers and the arks looked very clean.

4. Comments

If you're concerned about how much time your [supermarket / branded] organic chicken will have spent running around outdoors, only buy it when there has been plenty of daylight in the previous couple of months, when it might have found more to forage on in the long grass, and may have built up more muscle from ranging.

Just because a supermarket / branded chicken is 'organic' means it may well have been produced under a farming system just as planned and deliberate as any industrial process.

The SA are continually revising their standards. I find it worrying that individual farmers can effectively lobby the SA to relax

standards. I also find it reassuring that the SA is responsive to producer feedback about whether its standards can be sensibly applied in practice (in general, not in the specific case of poultry).

Stocking density : even under SA regs, table chickens can go up to batches of 1000 with special dispensation. Perhaps they keep each other warm ? It must be freezing halfway up a hill in NE Scotland in January.

In order to be certified as organic, chickens have to be allowed to range, so an organic chicken is free-range by default.

Soil Association standards do not allow GM products in foodstuffs, so organic will also (for now) be GM-free.

Personally, I didn't eat poultry produced on a large commercial scale before this visit (though I was considering organic trad breeds from small-scale producers with flock/cohort sizes of less than 50 birds), but it hasn't changed my mind : I still wouldn't. Come the summer, I might think about it.

If you'd like to comment on this article or any of the issues raised in it, why not start a thread on the Downsizer 'Poultry and Livestock' forum ?

Useful link :

Soil Association : www.soilassociation.org