

## Poultry and the organic system

Poultry and the organic system When considering poultry in an organic system, you need to understand how an organic system works. An organic system is all about the relationship of different enterprises to the whole. Every enterprise needs to contribute to the farm as well as producing a saleable product. The grass/clover ley (land temporarily under grass) provides forage for cattle or sheep. At the same time the clover (legume) element of the ley, while increasing the protein in the forage, is also fixing nitrogen that can be exploited by a following crop.

The cattle or sheep, while producing a saleable product are returning an element of the nutrients they consume onto the ground. When housed during the winter months these nutrients (in the manure) can be directed at specific areas.

The last year of a ley, before it is turned back into the ground, is the opportunity to consider poultry or possibly pigs. In this way the poultry not only produce a saleable product, either eggs or meat, they contribute to the following crop.

If fed a bought in ration, there would be a net gain in nutrients. If fed from a ration produced on the farm using farm grain they are minimising the loss of nutrients from the farm and redirecting those nutrients where they can be best used by the following crop. As with the over wintered cattle there will also be high value manure from the chickens housing which can be directed where required.

However, just as with pigs there are criteria that need to be met if the inclusion of organic poultry is going to be successful in an organic system including:

- Soil type: The soil needs to be relatively free draining. Heavy, wet land not only makes access difficult it also creates more challenges for the birds
- Shelter: Poultry need a sheltered environment, so more exposed location should be avoided if possible
- Labour: By definition, organic poultry production is more labour intensive than conventional systems. The birds are housed in smaller groups, often in mobile housing. Because the houses are often moved around the farm, there may be instances where the birds are at some distance from the farm buildings.
- Capital: A considerable amount of capital investment is required to establish a successful and efficient organic poultry production unit of any reasonable size. Depending on whether there are existing slaughter facilities available to you, this may also require setting up a processing unit on farm. See article on small scale slaughter facilities.

### The Organic Standards

To sell a product as organic, it is necessary to be registered with one of the organic sector bodies. There are a number of bodies operating in the UK. They are all private companies, licensed by the UK Government to enforce the organic standards. The minimum standards are laid down by the EU. These are interpreted by DEFRA under the guidance of the Advisory Committee on Organic Standards, (ACOS). The individual bodies are then responsible for implementing these standards on the farm. This takes the form of annual inspections. As well as the minimum standards some bodies apply their own, additional standards. For example, the Soil Association has a lower number of birds per batch or per house than the minimum standards.

It is possible, if following the letter of the law, to run just an organic layer or meat bird enterprise. Although possible this would basically be a monoculture dependant on bought in feeds. Because it lacked the rotation, problems would arise.

If you are in Wales or England and thinking of setting up an organic poultry unit, you may be entitled to a FREE visit under the Government funded Organic Conversion Information Service. Contact Steve Merritt for more information 07904 730092.

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