

## How can you save on your feed bill? Part One

Pasture Management for free range and organic PoultrySite requirements for free range and organic poultry.Pasture management for free range and organic poultry is all about getting more birds onto the range and providing them with the kind of environment that is going to benefit them. This will in turn benefit the farmer by potentially leading to a cost saving on bought in feed.

Do chickens actually get any nutritional benefit from the range?According to genetic researchers all modern breeds of chickens can be traced back to a sub species, Gallus gallus, found in North East Thailand. It is thought to have entered Europe, via Iran, between 3000 and 2000BC, although it took a further 1000 years to spread across to Western Europe. It is thought that the bird we know call a chicken (Gallus gallus domesticus), is a hybrid of the red jungle fowl, (gallus gallus) and the grey jungle fowl (gallus sonneratii), both of which are members of the pheasant family. Interestingly "chicken" was originally the term for a chick, while the species as a whole were called fowl. It should also be remembered that chickens are omnivores. They will eat seeds and insects and even larger animals such as lizards or mice. Studies of feral chickens has shown that they will scratch in the humus under trees, bushes and crops consuming seeds berries and insects.The chickens natural habitat would have included dappled light, not continuous cover. They would roost in low branches, removing themselves from predators and they have an innate fear of wide-open spaces as it leaves them prone to predator attack. Despite over 3000 years of domestication the modern chicken still displays these tendencies and will react positively to conditions that go someway to recreating this environment.Site requirementsIf you are looking at a new site then you need to consider:Legal positionSoil structure/site orientationHousingRange designAn environmental impact assessment and an environmental permit may be required if your system is above 40,000 birds and is regarded as intensive. There would also be restrictions placed on land designated as SSSIs (site of special scientific interest) or as NVS (Nitrate Vulnerable Sites). Care should also be taken that watercourses are not polluted with soil or nutrient run off. Free-range poultry basically means all year round access to the site. A layer bird eats 50 odd kg per year; there are also eggs to be collected every day. This all amounts to a lot of traffic to and from the house. The soil type needs to be able to put up with this with minimum damage. It also needs to be free draining enough to allow pop hole areas to remain relatively intact during the winter months. In permanent housing the area in front of the pop hole can be gravelled, or in other ways covered, to spread the concentration of birds at this particular spot and permanent tracks can be established. When using mobile housing that moves around the farm in a rotation this is not so straightforward. To prevent long-term damage to soil structure, consider your soil type. Heavy clay soils, with constant traffic, are going to end up damaged. Conversely a very free-range soil, such as a sand, will not be able to maintain cover over very dry spells. If you are rearing meat birds, which have a 3 or 4 month turn round time, you could consider in the winter months, rearing on specific areas of the farm, where less damage would occur. This could be just off a farm track, or closer to the farm. Ultimately it would be possible to drain areas specifically for poultry production, although this would be very costly.Just as a crop benefits from being on a south west facing slope compared with a north facing slope, so do free range poultry. Southerly-orientated areas warm up significantly quicker in the spring and are able, in winter months, to shed frost or snow quicker. This will benefit your poultry and will save you on feed, otherwise consumed to maintain temperature. They will also better grow cover crops/grass cover thus reducing muddy areas and surface water.If you have heavier soils then run off of soil and nutrients will be more likely. Not only could this lead to problems with the environment agency but it is also a loss to your farm of nutrients and soil that could benefit you. House position on the site is important. Pop holes ideally need to be at right angles to the prevailing wind, thus cutting down the wind blowing through the pop hole. It is also worth considering guttering, especially over the pop holes. Many free-range producers, even with mobile housing, use a veranda. This allows access to a greater covered area as well as spreading the concentration around the pop hole.Positioning a house near woodland or thick vegetation may increase the risk of fox or mink attacks. Similarly rodents, such as rats and mice, will travel from hedgerows. At the other extreme, very exposed sites open up the risk of wind damage to the house and to the poultry's performance.4. DEFRA regulations state that the range must not extend more than 150 m from the pop hole, this maybe extended to 350m if shelters (4 per ha) and drinkers are provided on the range. Maximum stocking rate should not exceed 2500/ha. Other bodies may have stocking rates less than this, Lion code 2000, while freedom foods now allow 2000/ha with additional requirements.If you like this article, feel free to share it with your own list, post it on your site, on your blog, or add it to your autoresponder. Twitter it, Facebook it, translate it. As long as you leave it intact and do not alter it in anyway. All links must remain in the article. No textual amendments permitted. Only exception is Twitter.©The Welsh Poultry Centre. All rights reserved.Wouldn't you love to get regular information on production, processing and marketing organic or free range meat and eggs which looks at the latest ideas and cost saving methods to help you get the most from your poultry enterprise?Then sign up for the free monthly Welsh Poultry Times newsletter. Click the sign up button once you get there. Follow me: on Twitter at my Blog About the authorStephen Merritt is a partner in The Welsh Poultry Centre and an accredited advisor and board member of The Institute of Organic Training and Advice and has spent over 30 years working in sustainable agriculture in developing countries, England and Wales. In the last 8 years Steve has specialised in free range and organic poultry production and now offers on farm advice and training to this sector.