

How do you know if your site is suitable for outdoor poultry?

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Getting the site right is crucial to the success of your poultry enterprise. If you are looking at a new site then you need to consider:

1. Legal position
2. Soil structure/site orientation
3. Housing Position
4. Range design

On a potential new site, the first area to consider is the possible legal situation.

An 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. This may not initially seem a problem but a field will deteriorate very quickly during the winter months, with constant traffic, (see soil structure below).

Planning Consent Required?

Planning consent should not be necessary for mobile poultry housing. This is because the structure is not permanent and is connected with the use of the land for agricultural purposes. If you do come up against problems with the Planning Department, professional advice should be sought.

Do you need to register with The Great Britain Poultry Register (GBPR)?

If you intend to keep more than 50 birds, of any species or mixture of species, you are required by law to register them with the Great Britain Poultry Register, (GBPR). This body was set up after the potential avian flu risk to monitor poultry numbers and to allow prompt alerts to be given to individuals if needs be. The GBPR can be contacted at www.defra.gov.uk/diseases/vetsurveillance/poultry/index.htm or phone 08006341112 The register requires

1. Your name
2. Your premises address
3. Your County Parish Holding (CPH) number (if you have one)
4. The number of poultry that are usually on the premises
5. Their type of housing; and
6. The purposes for which they are reared

Do you need to register with The Egg Marketing Inspectorate (EMI)?

If you enter the world of egg production you will also enter the world of the Egg Marketing Inspectorate. The Egg Marketing Inspectorate, (EMI) is the body within England and Wales that interprets and defines EU law as regard to eggs.

You will need to register with them if you:

- a) have more than 350 layer birds
- b) have more than 50 layer birds and are selling at local public markets
- c) any of your eggs are sold to a registered packing centre

More information concerning the Egg Marketing Inspectorate can be found at www.welshpoultrycentre.co.uk/Marketing/Do-I-need-to-be-registered-with-the-Egg-Marketing-Inspectorate.html

2. Soil structure/site orientation

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.

What type of soil do you have?

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-draining soil, such as sand, will not be able to maintain cover during very dry spells. If you are rearing meat birds, which have a 3 or 4 month turn round time, you could consider rearing on specific areas of the farm in the winter months, choosing areas 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.

What aspect is your site?

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 shed frost or snow quicker in the winter months. 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.

Therefore, on a new site you are ideally looking for a southerly facing aspect and a reasonably free draining soil. You also need to consider traffic flow, especially during the winter months.

3. Housing Position

House position on the site is important. Pop holes ideally need to be at right angles to the prevailing wind, thus reducing the wind blowing through the pophole. 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, bird of prey and/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. Range design

The term 'free-range' is defined by EU law which states that the chicken 'must have access to outdoor runs' that are 'mainly covered with vegetation'. 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. The organic bodies have their own stocking density and also require that there is some rotation planned, giving area a chance to rest. Within an organic rotation this would also give the producer an opportunity to exploit the nutrients left by the birds with some form of cropping.

The EU and DEFRA regulations should be regarded as a minimum and although there is no regulations regarding rotation it would be well advised to consider, even if you are free-range.

About the author

Stephen 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.

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