

LeValle Egg Farms

May 6, 2002

The National Organic Standards Board
c/o Katherine Benham
Room 4008 – South Building
1400 and Independence Avenue, SW
Washington, DC 20250-0001

Dear Ladies and Gentlemen of the National Organic Standards Board:

I appreciate the opportunity to express the concerns that I have in relation to the National Organic Program Final Rule 7 CFR §205 dated December 21, 2000.

LeValle Egg Farms has been producing certified organic eggs in Pennsylvania since January 1997, and our management process begins with day old chicks. Currently we have five organic laying houses (avg. 10,000 hens) and three organic pullet houses, located in various points in Pennsylvania, that are certified with PCO (Pennsylvania Certified Organics) & NOFA-NY. Each of the farms that we work with is owned and operated by individual families that are on a daily basis, caring for and meeting the needs of the laying hens.

I would like to share the concerns I have in regards to making it mandatory for us to put our Organic Laying Hens outside:

I had the opportunity to participate in the North Atlantic Poultry Health & Management Conference held March 21, 2002 in Portsmouth NH, in which Mr. Eric Sideman spoke on the topic of organic standards for poultry. As part of Mr. Sideman's presentation, he mentioned that one of the primary requirements of the organic consumer is that they receive a safe food for themselves and their family to consume. As a producer in organic eggs in the commonwealth of Pennsylvania, we too have set this as our primary objective. Based around this concept, is our unanimous participation for all of our flocks, in the PEQAP program. The Pennsylvania Egg Quality Assurance Program (PEQAP) is considered a national leader in food safety programs for egg production in the United States. We have very stringent criteria for rodent control in the layer house as a primary tool for reduction of Se in chicken houses and to increase the safety of our eggs. A high level of management and expense to maintain the integrity of the house and keep rodents out is at the heart of our food safety program. The PEQAP program focuses on the specific needs that were identified by the President's Council on Food Safety, during the Clinton Administration, to eliminate Se in eggs. Based upon this conflict in goals, I would make a recommendation for the NOSB have written into the final ruling, the FDA's official response to this meeting this requirement of poultry outdoor access and the relationship in complying with the President's Council on Food Safety for the reduction of Se in eggs.

One of the key components for complying with the PEQAP program is eliminating rodents from accessing the pullet/layer house. We have worked very hard at eliminating any entry points for rodents that are the size of a pencils diameter or larger, into the pullet/layer house. There is a wealth of scientific data supporting the fact that both mice and rats are a vector's for transmission of Se. If we are required to modify our houses to comply with the current draft recommendation, by creating un-restricted access points to the outdoors for the hens, this will diminish all of the accomplishments we have worked so hard to obtain.

The draft recommendation also identifies that the organic consumer is expecting the production of organic eggs to come from hens that have the ability to go outside. During my discussion with Mr. Sideman, he identified that he was not aware of any data supporting that the consumer is actually having this expectation. Mr. Sideman responded to me, saying if anyone would know of any such data it would be Dr. William Lockeretz Acting Director, Center of Agriculture, Food and Environment and Program in Agriculture, Food and Environment at Tufts Nutrition University. I had contacted Dr. Lockeretz on 3/22/02 to discuss this subject, and he responded that he was not aware of any such information, that identifies the organic consumer has these expectations (organic laying hens need access to the outdoors).

The colder weather patterns of the northeast mandate farmers provide adequate shelter during a significant part of the year. Producing organic certified organic eggs in northern states will be virtually impossible during the winter months under the draft proposal. The proposal will create a regionally discriminatory effect favoring one region at the expense of the family farms in another areas.

Disease control is a significant challenge for any poultry producer in Pennsylvania whether they produce for organic or conventional eggs. All producers must establish appropriate housing and sanitation practices to minimize the occurrence and spread of disease. Access to the outdoors to comply with the proposed organic standards will without question increase the risk of disease introduction into layer houses.

According to a game and fisheries specialist at Penn State University, many species of waterfowl and other birds migrate through Pennsylvania as a part of their natural flyways. There is a major wildlife reserve located in a central location to our farms called Middlecreek Wildlife Reserve. This location is a temporary home to a multitude of migrating waterfowl. In addition to this reserve, just driving down most rural Pennsylvania roads, you will notice migratory waterfowl making a short term home in our crop fields, small bodies of water, or farm pastures many times through out the year.

As evidenced in Minnesota recently and during studies conducted in an outbreak of avian influenza in Pennsylvania in 1983, devastating poultry diseases are commonly carried by waterfowl and can be transmitted to any poultry they or their feces come into contact. Exposure to the outdoors will increase the likelihood of chickens contracting disease and will have a tremendous economic impact on all farms in the area.

The poultry industry in Pennsylvania experienced devastation to poultry flocks as a result of exposure to AI-infected ducks and geese in 1983. Millions of dollars were spent to destroy flocks of chickens and turkeys to this disease and created an incredible economic impact on the family farms that depend on poultry as their only source of income. It is imperative to minimize the risk of exposure to disease not only for the health of the birds but also the viability of the organic poultry producers.

Currently in the state of Virginia, they are facing a disastrous outbreak of AI, in which as of 5/2/02 over 3 Million Turkeys and Chickens have tested positive and are being depopulated within 24 hours of the positive results. Flocks are continuing to be tested positive, all most on a daily basis. They still have not been able to control the spread of this disease. This is much closer to home for us, than we would ever wish for. One of our Organic layer flocks is less than 100 miles from the most northern AI positive county in Virginia. Because of this severe situation, all of the Farmers in our part of the state are on the highest Bio-Security Alert level possible.

Water resource protection is a high priority for organic egg producers in Pennsylvania. Sound nutrient management to protect water quality has been a priority of the poultry industry for decades. Mandatory outside access has the potential to create a situation where soil levels of nitrogen and phosphorus become elevated and create a water quality hazard. Rainfall on unprotected outside pens will leach nitrogen and potentially phosphorus into groundwater and contaminate water supplies.

Flies will also become an even greater nuisance as they increase their populations in the ideal environments outside access will create. Allowing for covered protection with an impervious floor is the best way to manage poultry manure and protect our water resources.

I do support that there is an opportunity for the production of organic eggs that are raised on pasture, because I believe there is a specialty market looking for this commodity. But, I would request that the NOSB not try to meet the needs of these two markets, by combining the requirements into one set of standards. I would make the recommendation, that there be two types of organic egg production standards developed. One that would be certified organic pastured eggs, and those flocks have the requirement to access the outdoors, and the other for cage free/roaming organic eggs that would be following the current standards, w/o requiring access to the outdoors.

As you prepare to make decisions that will clearly effect the future of our family farm's producing organic eggs, I would ask that you please base the final decision from the wealth of scientific data identifying how detrimental it will be to the hens, consumers, farmers and environment if the hens are required to access the outdoors. Today's organic egg market is such a major success story in the realm of organic commodities, that has been achieved from a growing demand for economically produced organic eggs while providing an environment for the laying hen which minimizes disease and inclement weather challenges, increases food safety, and protects the environment. These production practices ultimately prove less stressful on laying hens and should be adopted as acceptable production practices for organic egg production.

For these reasons, I strongly encourage the Livestock Committee to the following recommendations, either alter the language in its recommendations to exempt laying hens from the outdoor requirement or create two types of standards, one focused on certified organic pastured eggs, and those flocks have the requirement to access the outdoors, and the other for cage free/roaming organic eggs that would be following the current standards, w/o requiring access to the outdoors. Egg producers seeking certification for organic production without outdoor access can provide housing for chickens that allow free roaming in a barn, have easy access to organically-produced feeds, fresh water, fresh air ventilated into the barns and direct sunlight by means of windows and curtain sidewalls.

Sincerely,

Chris Pierce

LeValle Egg Farms
Annville, Pennsylvania