

To: National Organic Standards Board
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Room 4008 South Building
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Washington, D.C. 20250-0001

May 8, 2002

From: Steven P. Mahrt
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Dear NOSB,

I am a dedicated certified organic egg producer since 1996. I have also been raising free roaming laying hens since 1983. As a caretaker of these hens, I am concerned by the recent NOSB livestock committee recommendation that requires outdoor access. The first publication of the rules seemed to allow for organic egg production to occur in cages. Included in the 250,000 responses to the first release of the organic rules was that livestock including organic laying hens not be kept in cages. The simplest way to achieve this was require access to outdoors. My personal communications with our organic consumers through our web site, or in person, has validated that finding. However, when I explained to our organic consumers that while we let the laying hens run and exhibit normal chicken behavior, we don't want them to go outside because it is not humane, environmentally sound nor does it provide for adequate food safety. Once provided the explanation, our consumers appreciated the thoughtfulness of our systematic approach to all aspects of organic egg production. Our sales have continued to increase. The intent of the regulation for outdoor access is to ensure that poultry is not be raised in cages. Freedom of movement and the ability to exhibit natural behavior is an important part of the organic system. A properly

designed poultry barn should allow for natural ventilation, access to direct sunlight and room to exercise. Many years of studying chicken behavior and health does not support the notion that outdoor access improves the hen's welfare, otherwise chicken farmers wouldn't have abandoned the practice in the 1940's. I will elaborate in the following pages about the concerns the U.S.D.A NOP should have about outdoor access to Organic laying hens.

Humane Treatment:

One of the keys to raising organic laying hens is the reduction of stress and limiting the exposure to unknown disease vectors and predators. During the 70's the West Coast lost millions of chickens due to Exotic Newcastle disease. This was traced back to exotic birds brought in from South America. In the 80's the USDA had to slaughter millions of chickens because they were exposed to Avian Influenza from migratory water fowl. With both of these cases the U.S.D.A indemnified (paid for the cost of disposing of the infected flocks) the producers because of a mandatory eradication program. Is the U.S.D.A willing to risk increasing the opportunities of these diseases or others reappearing because of the increased exposure to wild fowl in an open system? During the 90's Salmonella exposure from rodents changed the way consumers looked at the once safe egg. In every instance, these diseases were brought on by contamination of a domestic hen by wild or natural vectors. Vaccines have helped control some of the diseases, but they are most effective when combined with a rigorous bio-security program with an emphasis on exclusion.

Outdoor access creates a parasite load that will compromise the immune system of the laying hen. Mites, a blood sucking parasite, coccidiosis, a protozoan parasite that destroys the intestinal wall and worms, which deprive the birds of nutrients, create much suffering and leave the bird vulnerable to a host of other debilitating diseases. These threats are transferred to the hens by rodents and wild birds which contaminate the feed and environment with droppings and feathers. The chickens then eat this and become exposed to whatever disease they were harboring. Once the hens or the ranch has these diseases, there are little or no tools for the farmer to use to break the cycle because many of these diseases can remain viable in the soil for years. One must not forget that the laying hen has a productive life of over 2 years as compared to the broiler of just 7 to 8 weeks.

Most laying hen farms have a separate facility to raise their young laying stock. Typically these houses are isolated from their laying operations in order to limit the disease exposure until the young bird has been properly vaccinated and their immune system has developed. A proper vaccination program is the organic farms number one tool to maintain a healthy flock. On our farm the pullet (young chicken) receives her last vaccination at 14 weeks. This proposed rule would compromise my entire vaccination program by exposing the pullet to unknown vectors before her immune system can mature. Five weeks of age may be appropriate for a broiler hen because they have lived 70% of their useful life. In comparison a laying type chicken would be almost 75 weeks old at the same stage in her life.

Many layer farms in the U.S. now have a HACCP program to ensure the health of both the chickens as well as the consumer. On my farm one of our goals is to

have no holes in the wall: larger than the end of pencil eraser within two feet of the ground in order to keep mice out, which are major carriers of Salmonella. The balance of the walls are open with 1 by 1/2 inch wire to keep wild birds out and yet allow direct sunlight and fresh air. My family has been raising laying hens for eggs since the 1920 s. I can remember seeing my uncle's chicken ranch and asking him why he had these wire pens next to every chicken house. His reply was that he thought he needed them. He then went on to say that the best thing he did for the chickens was keep them out of those yards because they always made the chickens sick. And once he kept them inside he said mortality dropped in half. This mortality didn't happen immediately it was a gradual increase over time. By requiring outside access to laying hens I will be threatening the flocks to inhumane disease challenges that in most cases have no organic treatments. This will force the organic farmer to make a hard choice, either medicate if possible and lose organic standing or hope that the losses will not be too severe once the disease runs its course. Neither of these alternatives are in keeping with the organic principles of humane treatment of animals. Those that claim that they let their hens go outside are playing Russian roulette. It is not whether something will happen but when.

Environment:

The environmental concerns when allowing a laying hen outdoors varies from ground water contamination to polluting our water ways. The Petaluma area was once considered the Egg Basket of the World. Its pastures of sandy loams and rolling hills lent itself well to providing good drainage for the many small

chicken farms that kept their hens in yards and houses. This pasture system initially worked well because the area near the chicken houses had not been used for chickens. The poultry breeds available were not too distant from their ancestors and the outdoor access provided Vitamin D. Every one was ignorant of the potential problems of ground water pollution and manure run off. This began in the 1920's and continued until the 1940's. Adding Vitamin D to the feed eliminated the need for outdoor access, but the damage was done. This entire area is now a nitrate zone. All wells must now be cased down to 100 feet deep so that nitrate contaminated water will not filter into the well. Nitrates are a problem because they interfere with oxygen absorption particularly in young children. My house is on an old chicken ranch and we buy bottled water because our water has 12 ppm nitrates and safe drinking is less than 5 ppm.

As the demand for organic eggs grows, farm and house sizes will grow. This is a natural by-product of success. One of the natural tendencies of a hen is the desire to be near to the area where they sleep at night. This habit tends to keep the hens close to the houses which concentrates their manure in a specific area. This is true for large scale farms as well as small ones. Also, many traditional agricultural areas are beginning to share the land with their suburban counterparts who are less interested in the dust, feathers, and flies that will not be accepted, understood or allowed. During a big wind storm in Petaluma, when the feathers were blowing all over, many termed this "Petaluma snow". This would be undesirable to the average home owner in the new century. Escaped chickens, while cute to some, make a mess of one's patio. Containing the chickens would be a requirement with a fenced area which includes wire over its top in all but the most rural areas.

Speaking with representatives from The Regional Bay Area Water Control District, they would recommend some type of barrier that would not allow the rain to drive the manure from the range area into the soil. To prevent this, some type of covering would be recommended so that rain water does not run off this area. This would be the environmentally sound way of giving the hens the benefits of exercise, fresh air, and direct sunlight without polluting the area.

Summary and Recommendations

When the 250,000 people responded to the first proposed rule, they wanted to be assured that poultry would not be kept in cages. That recommendation was not restrictive enough. Now, however the pendulum has swung to the other extreme by requiring outdoor access to poultry. This proposal has a high likelihood to jeopardize the hen's health and welfare, causing environmental pollution and erosion, while endangering human health with Salmonella disease.

The livestock committee has acknowledged that outdoor access is problematic by recognizing the many stated exceptions. This is a difficult issue to resolve because it has political and emotional implications. This proposal may work in certain areas of the country where a poultry ranch could be isolated from other birds. In the areas of the country that receive little rainfall and have deep aquifers so that ground water remains clear it may also work. The problem is that scenario describes a very small area of the country. The rest of the country has on going issues that should not allow outdoor access. Many egg producers have converted

abandon ranches and upgraded them for organic production. Is this recommendation going to put them out of organic production even though they have been a member of the organic community for many years? I would recommend the following standard as a solution to the problem.

1 Organically managed poultry must have access to outdoors **during the months** of the year when feasible **OR** provide for natural ventilation and direct access to **sunlight when** present. Poultry should have the ability to access a substantial portion of the house freely while providing dusting and scratching areas. If these requirements cannot be fulfilled because they are using a closed type house (closed **walls** and powered ventilation with artificial lighting). Then an area outside of the confines of the building must be provided which provides access to direct sunlight and natural ventilation while protecting bird health and the environment. This recommendation has the bird welfare as its focal point while not **endangering** the environment. Consumers desire for the birds to exhibit natural behaviors will be fulfilled and all areas of the country should be able to meet these requirements. I am only commenting on the egg laying chickens and their needs. The broiler type chicken has entirely different requirements and this paper does not address their needs.