

# POULTRY

## FREE RANGE EGG PRODUCTION

CALU FACTSHEET

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### INTRODUCTION

There has been considerable growth in free range egg sales in recent years. Free range egg production could be as much as 50% of the UK total by 2011, and the EU ban on conventional laying cages, which comes into effect in 2012, is likely to drive the switch to free range even further. The UK free range egg laying flock currently stands at around 14 million birds and the recent decisions made by voluntary assurance schemes operating in the sector has opened the way for existing producers to expand further. The term “free range” generally includes “organic” egg production too. However, organic egg sales peaked at 5% of the market around two years ago and have since slipped back to around 3% of the market now.

### GETTING STARTED

The most fundamental piece of advice, before you even think about how big the shed will be or what equipment to use, is to find a market for the eggs. There has been concern expressed that the market for free range eggs is about to be oversupplied. Contact several of the major egg packing companies to see if they will buy your eggs, and at what price.

Another option is to work with companies offering “franchise” type operations. Here, the producer is supplied with a package, perhaps including the building, birds and feed and a guaranteed buy-back on all eggs produced.

A small number of farmers choose to market their eggs direct to retail outlets or through farm shops and markets. Prices can be higher but it is a more difficult market to break into and needs careful market research. Additional rules and regulations will apply to this type of operation.

### HOUSING

For a successful free range egg enterprise you will ideally need a well-drained, reasonably flat site, with sufficient space for the ranging area, and preferably a good layer of established grass. The use of heavy, poorly drained land may result in poaching of the ranging area by the chickens.

Ideally, buildings should be accessible to lorries for feed deliveries, egg collection and initial construction. Housing should have access to water and electricity, with sufficient water storage and back-up electricity in case of frozen pipes or blackouts. For small mobile houses, renewable energy sources such as wind and solar power are becoming popular.

Before purchasing poultry housing speak to as many suppliers of housing and equipment as possible and talk to current egg producers to seek advice on the most appropriate housing system for the farm. Suppliers should be able to arrange visits for prospective purchasers to existing producers.

Conventionally, most free range egg production in the UK has been from “single tier” houses. In these systems two thirds of the floor area is slatted and the remaining one-



Cronfa Amaethyddol Ewrop ar gyfer Datblygu  
Gwledig: Ewrop yn Buddsoddi  
mewn Ardaloedd Gwledig  
The European Agricultural Fund for  
Rural Development: Europe Investing in  
Rural Areas



Centre for Alternative Land Use  
Canolfan Debyddol Tir Amgen



Llywodraeth Cynulliad Cymru  
Welsh Assembly Government

third is litter (generally white wood shavings or chopped straw). There is a single tier of feeders, drinkers and nest boxes situated on top of the slatted area. Manure is disposed of at the end of the flock. Recently, an increasing number of free range producers have been installing “multi-tier” systems where feeding, drinking and egg laying are on a number of different levels. One of the benefits of multi-tier systems over single-tier is that a larger number of birds can be kept in a house of the same dimensions. In these systems, manure is collected on belts and removed weekly. Consideration should be given to storage and utilisation of manure from the unit.

Houses must be capable of being thoroughly cleansed and disinfected between flocks. Areas around the buildings must be kept clear of rubbish, clutter and feed spills in order to discourage rodents and flies. Regular checking of bait boxes is essential to keep track of, and minimise rodent activity. Producers should check the litter weekly for signs of fly larvae, as populations can explode in warm weather.

The cost of single tier free range units (including equipment such as slats, nest boxes, automatic egg collection etc) can be around £25 per bird, with mobile houses and equipment costing around £30 per bird. With most new flocks now averaging 10,000 to 16,000 birds per farm, a significant capital investment is required to establish a free range egg production unit. Labour requirements can vary enormously depending on the size of the houses and whether they are static or mobile. For example, a 10,000 bird free range flock in a static house will require one full time worker, seven days a week. To achieve the best results, staff should live as close to the unit as possible to provide constant supervision of the flock.

All permanent, and many mobile poultry houses, are likely to require planning permission, although the interpretation of planning requirements does vary from council to council. It is vital, therefore, to speak to local planners at an early stage to ascertain what permission is needed. It may take several weeks (at least) from the submission of the plan to the local planning authority to obtaining planning permission.

### **FLOCK MANAGEMENT**

A provisional order for pullets should be placed 6 to 12 months in advance of the planned production start date.

Point of lay pullets should be delivered to the farm (at 16 to 17 weeks of age) fully vaccinated and weighed on arrival to ensure accurate feeding before bringing them into lay. Lighting regimes should be continued from the rearing to the laying farm to ensure a smooth transition between farms.

Point of lay pullets currently cost around £3.35 at 16 weeks of age. Birds will start producing eggs at around 22 weeks of age but they could be 35-40 weeks of age before they are showing a positive cash flow. The flock will generally be depopulated at around 72 to 74 weeks of age when egg production becomes un-economic. The number of eggs produced per bird can vary significantly between systems and breeds, but a range of 285 to 305 eggs per bird can be achievable in most systems.

Attention to detail and good husbandry is the key to successful flocks. Producers should consider what support can be provided by their packer, feed supplier, vet etc to assist

them in the difficult first few weeks of the new enterprise. Birds should be weighed throughout their lives, and feed formulated based on feed supplier's advice. Careful monitoring of the flock on a daily basis will reveal any disease threats, and producers should work closely with their vet to ensure optimum flock health.

### **RULES AND REGULATIONS**

All free range egg producers must register with Animal Health's Egg Marketing Inspectorate. The Inspectorate carries out checks on flock size, availability of land, internal stocking densities and the records (of production and sales) which are required by the EU Egg Marketing Regulations.

Under the EU Regulations the maximum permitted internal stocking density for new units is 9 birds / m<sup>2</sup>. The maximum legal outdoor stocking density is 2,500 birds / hectare.

Producers will additionally have to undertake mandatory regular testing of the flock for Salmonella control purposes.

Producers with more than 50 birds **must** register their holding on Defra's Great Britain Poultry Register.

This is not a definitive list of all the rules and regulations covering free range egg production.

### **VOLUNTARY SCHEMES**

Most UK egg packers will require the flock to comply with the requirements of the BEIC Lion Code and RSPCA Freedom Food assurance schemes. For both schemes the maximum outdoor stocking density is limited to 2,000 birds / hectare. The outdoor ranging area must be covered mainly with vegetation, and producers are obliged to enrich the ranging area, by planting trees for example, in order to encourage the birds to range which can be beneficial in reducing injurious feather pecking in the flock.

### **USEFUL CONTACTS**

Welsh Assembly Government (Processing and Marketing Grant for projects which identify, exploit and service new, emerging and existing markets) [www.wales.gov.uk](http://www.wales.gov.uk)

ADAS (Practical advice on all aspects of establishing a free range poultry unit, including obtaining planning permission) [www.adas.co.uk](http://www.adas.co.uk)

British Free Range Egg Producers Association (free range egg producer association and publisher of the monthly "Ranger" magazine) [www.bfrepa.co.uk](http://www.bfrepa.co.uk)

National Farmers' Union (representing the interests of all farmers and growers)  
[www.nfuonline.com](http://www.nfuonline.com)

British Egg Industry Council (Lion Code of Practice – most of the major packers are members of the scheme) [www.britisheggindustry.com](http://www.britisheggindustry.com)

*Royal Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (Freedom Food welfare scheme – most free range egg production is covered by the scheme)* [www.rspca.org.uk](http://www.rspca.org.uk)

Animal Health (Egg Marketing Inspectorate)  
[www.defra.gov.uk/animalhealth/about-us/eggs.htm](http://www.defra.gov.uk/animalhealth/about-us/eggs.htm)

Defra (Poultry Register) [www.defra.gov.uk](http://www.defra.gov.uk)

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