

Egg production – Registration, Marketing and Welfare

Registration of laying hen establishments

All laying hen establishments (production sites) under the scope of [Directive 1999/74/EC for the protection of laying hens](#) must be registered and allocated a distinguishing number. This is implemented in Northern Ireland through the [Registration of Establishments \(Laying Hens\) Regulations \(Northern Ireland\) 2003](#).

This legislation prohibits the operation of any egg production site with 350 or more hens until an application has been submitted to DAERA and it has subsequently been registered and allocated a distinguishing number or “producer code”.

A single production site is considered to be one situated at a particular geographical location with epidemiological links between any individual hen houses on the site and, upon registration, will be allocated a code comprised of a prefix/es (0, 1, 2 or 3) indicating the method/s of production, the country of origin (UK9- for Northern Ireland) and a site or farm identification number.

A separate application form must be submitted for each production site.

If producers wish to differentiate between particular hen houses on a site and manage these as separate entities for business purposes, DAERA may grant additional characters as a suffix to the distinguishing number e.g. #UK9-xxx H1

It is important to note that whereas the country of origin and site identification elements of the code allocated will not change, the prefix - indicating the farming method(s) used in individual hen houses on the site, is subject to meeting the minimum method of production standards in Egg Marketing [Delegated Regulation \(EU\) 2023/2465](#) and will therefore be regularly verified by DAERA and changed when necessary.

The application form for registration is available via the following link on the DAERA website:

[Application for Registration of an Egg Production Establishment \(Production Site\) \(EMR2B\)](#)

This form should be submitted at least one month prior to a layer house being populated.

It is critical that all aspects of the form are completed, including owner, operator or keeper links to other laying hen establishments, and that appropriately marked maps are supplied, along with field areas and evidence of legal rights to access. Incomplete forms will not be processed which will either restrict ability to market any eggs or restrict marketing of eggs with an intended production system prefix (Free range or Barn).

A new application form must be submitted if there is any change to previously submitted information, for example, additional layer houses, changes to capacity or methods of production in existing houses or regarding names and addresses of operators.

Egg Marketing

EU marketing legislation [Regulation \(EU\) No 1308/2013](#) requires hen eggs to be individually marked with the producer code allocated under the above Registration of Establishments legislation. With certain exceptions, this marking must be carried out on farm and applies to all eggs produced.

The minimum requirements for the various methods of production, as indicated by the initial digit (the prefix) of the code, are laid down in [Delegated Regulation \(EU\) 2023/2465](#) and, for Organic systems, in [Regulation \(EU\) 2018/848 on organic production](#).

In relation to 'Enriched cage', 'Barn' and 'Free Range' methods of production, the minimum requirements to be met are indicated through cross-references to relevant Articles in [Directive 1999/74/EC for the protection of laying hens](#).

In the case of Free Range systems, minimum requirements in addition to those in welfare legislation are provided:

Minimum requirements for systems of production for the various egg farming methods referred to in Article 11(3)

1. 'Free-range eggs' must be produced in systems of production which satisfy at least the conditions laid down in Article 4 of Directive 1999/74/EC.

In particular, the following conditions must be satisfied:

(a) hens must have continuous daytime access to open-air runs. However, this requirement does not prevent a producer from restricting access for a limited period of time in the morning hours in accordance with usual good farming practice, including good animal husbandry practice. Where temporary restrictions have been imposed on the basis of Union legislation, eggs may be marketed as 'free-range' notwithstanding that restriction;

(b) open-air runs to which hens have access must be mainly covered with vegetation and not be used for other purposes except for orchards, woodland and livestock grazing. The competent authorities may authorise the use of open-air runs for other purposes, in particular the installation of solar panels, that are not conflicting with the animal welfare conditions as laid down in Directive 1999/74/EC and do not limit the mobility of the hens;

(c) the maximum stocking density of open-air runs must not be greater than 2 500 hens per hectare of ground available to the hens or one hen per 4 m² at all times. However, where at least 10 m² per hen is available and where rotation is practised and hens are given even access to the whole area over the flock's life, each paddock used must at any time assure at least 2.5 m² per hen;

(d) open-air runs must not extend beyond a radius of 150 m from the nearest pophole of the building. However, an extension of up to 350 m from the nearest pophole of the building is permissible provided that a sufficient number of shelters as referred to in Article 4(1), point 3(b)(ii), of Directive 1999/74/EC are evenly distributed throughout the whole open-air run with at least four shelters per hectare.

It is important to note that hens producing eggs marketed as Free Range must always have daytime access to range. The **only** derogation from this requirement is during any period when DAERA Veterinary Service have introduced mandatory housing measures in accordance with relevant legislation.

Further guidance on range requirements for Free Range flocks is provided below.

Animal Welfare

All egg production establishments and operators must comply with the minimum requirements specified in [Directive 1999/74/EC for the protection of laying hens](#) and with the [Welfare of Farmed Animals Regulations \(Northern Ireland\) 2012](#).

The relevant animal welfare legislation applies to the owner of the hens as well as to any person looking after the hens on their behalf, wherever the hens are located.

Owners of laying hens and any persons in charge of them must also be acquainted with and have access to a copy of DAERA's [Laying Hens Code of Practice](#).

Guidance on range requirements for Free Range flocks

There are numerous factors that must be taken into account by any person involved in Free Range egg production to ensure that the requirements of registration, marketing and welfare legislation are satisfied. Evidence of compliance with 'Free Range' criteria includes the hens exhibiting normal ranging behaviour and a significant proportion of the flock actively accessing and dispersing throughout the range area. Where this cannot be demonstrated, as well as considering the following provisions and guidance, additional measures and enhancements to encourage hens to range may be necessary.

- **Direct access to range**

From the popholes, hens must be able to see and easily access an open-air run that is mainly covered with vegetation and provides appropriate overhead cover. They must be able to reach the range without having to negotiate narrow passageways or other obstructions.

- **Area of range required**

The maximum stocking rate is 1 Hectare per 2,500 hens (4m²/hen) and, if rotation is practiced, 2.5 hectares per 2,500 hens (10m²/hen).

Eligible range area must be within a maximum distance of 350m from nearest pophole, as travelled by hens.

The entire range area must be accessible to hens at all times, unless rotation is practiced.

Where rotation is practiced, the stocking density on any area of range provided must never exceed 2.5m²/hen.

Hens must not be confined to small paddocks immediately outside the house at stocking rates in excess of these maximums.

- **Obstructions to range access**

Any measures or structures that actively, or inadvertently, discourage hens from accessing the full range area may be considered as obstructions. A non-exhaustive list of examples is provided below.

- **Delaying range access** until hens are established in lay rather than at or before commencement of lay – flocks are less likely to range well in future. Any eggs laid prior to range access must not be marketed as 'Free Range'.
- **Popholes opening only into narrow, barren corridors** between houses or corridors created with impenetrable fencing immediately outside houses – this does not constitute direct access.
- **Electrified wire** positioned beneath popholes – risks conditioning birds not to approach popholes. Electric wires used to discourage laying in corners and smothering must never be placed in front of popholes and other access points to the range at any stage of rearing or laying for free range birds. Any electrified wire, whether insulated or otherwise, should be routed above the popholes.
- **High popholes** – risks injury, hens cannot see range from within house and may have difficulties in reaching or exiting popholes. If the height is more than 45cm from either ground level or floor level, continuous ramps, constructed with appropriate material and of suitable incline, must be provided in each case and these must extend to the full width of the popholes. Raised bars must not be used to provide access to high popholes as hens perching on these may obstruct other hens from accessing popholes.
- **Large and sharp stones**, particularly beneath high popholes – risks injury and dissuades birds from ranging. Small or rounded stones, or other suitable materials such as concrete or mesh, may be used in the area immediately outside popholes to aid cleanliness and drainage.

- **Roads, lanes and streams** – adequate and permanent means of providing access to range is necessary. Gated systems across laneways with regular vehicular access are not acceptable due to biosecurity risks.
- **Inadequate tunnels** used to provide range access across roads or lanes – if hens cannot clearly see range on the far side they will not use them. See general guidance below.

If underpasses or tunnels are required, the following guidelines will be useful:

- Where an underpass provides the only access to range (as is the case with verandas), the dimensions should largely meet the pophole requirements i.e. 2m total opening width per 1000 birds.
- Where an underpass is only needed to provide access to the outermost fields of the range area, bird density is likely to be significantly reduced, however, the width must always be sufficient to allow unobstructed access to range area.
- In general, the closer to the henhouse and the greater the proportion of range area to be accessed via the underpass, the greater the width required.
- For all underpasses, the minimum height of the underpass and layout of the surrounding area will be determined by birds being able to clearly see the range on far side. Siting and drainage will also be important to ensure that the underpass does not accumulate water.

Proposals for provision of access to range via underpasses should always be discussed with Inspectors before making an application and well in advance of commencing any site works.

It is important to note that for underpasses beneath public highways it is the producer's responsibility to liaise with the Department for Infrastructure and relevant planning authorities to ensure that all necessary consents have been obtained.

• **Shelters**

Shelter from adverse weather and predators must always be provided on range.

Shelters may be either natural, such as hedges and trees, or artificial.

When range areas extend beyond 150m from the nearest pophole, a minimum of four shelters per hectare must be provided and evenly distributed throughout the entire range area.

As hens are usually reluctant to cross large open areas of ground, shelters and enrichments should ideally be spaced in such a way that hens can see additional shelter from each "staging point".

In all cases, a proportion of shelters should be available close to the popholes, clearly visible and attractive to hens.