

# Organic Poultry

## Introduction

Organic poultry production in Ireland forms only a small part of organic farming. Producers are few. Poultry sales are low, due possibly to the limited supply. Organic poultry production is significantly more expensive than the corresponding commercial products. Organic Feed, which is the main input is 80% dearer than feed for conventional production. Growing cycles are longer; birds are afforded natural conditions such as grass paddocks, straw bedding and perches. Organic products must command a premium price over commercial products for production viability.

## The Market

Irish retailers cite difficulty in sourcing Irish organic produce. The market is as yet under developed. It would therefore seem that opportunities exist for poultry producers to generate products with organic symbol status. All poultry products are highly perishable and as such cannot be left around awaiting sale. The market must be procured well in advance of sale.

## Principles of Organic Farming

The term organic is clearly defined in EU law and standards have been developed in Ireland in compliance with that EU law. The label “organic” cannot be used loosely. Food is deemed organic when it has been produced in accordance with EEC Regulation 2092/91, on a farm registered with a certification body and awarded organic ‘symbol’ status. ‘Symbol’ status is awarded to a farm that has satisfactorily completed its conversion period. The Production Standards outline the principles and practices of sound organic agricultural systems. They involve the production of food of high quality, using sustainable management practices, avoiding damage to the environment and ensuring the ethical treatment of livestock. Only producers who believe in these principles and have a commitment to them should embark on organic poultry production.

## Organic Certification

There are three organic certification bodies in Ireland:

- **Demeter Standards**
- **Irish Organic Farmers & Growers Association (IOFGA)**
- **Organic Trust**

All potential producers of organic poultry must register with one of these. Transition from conventional to organic farming is a process that takes a minimum of one year “in conversion” and depending on the practices on the farm prior to organic transition, the farm may be two years “in conversion”. Thereafter, the product will have full organic symbol status and can be marketed as such.



## Fact Sheet No. 56 May 2006

This is one of a series of fact sheets on potential income generating activities.

All fact sheets are available in the Advisory Section of the Teagasc Website [www.teagasc.ie](http://www.teagasc.ie)

**Edited by:**  
**John Whiskey**  
**Paul Mc Carthy**  
Teagasc  
Mellows Development  
Centre  
Athenry, Co. Galway.  
+ 353 (0) 91 845200

Teagasc Fact Sheets present a brief overview of a topic. Further detailed advice should always be sought from relevant sources.

## Production

Poultry production is broadly divided into two sectors, meat and eggs. Meat includes, chicken, turkey, duck and goose. Irish poultry meat and eggs bearing the organic symbol are produced on organic farms that are registered, inspected and approved by one of the three organic certification bodies.

An organic label indicates to the consumer that a product was produced using certain production methods. The minimum space indoors and outdoors is set as an integral part of organic production. The basic guidelines are:

	Layers	Broilers	Turkeys	Ducks	Geese
Outdoor area (m <sup>2</sup> of area available in rotation per head) provided that the limit of 170kg/N/ha/year is not exceeded	4	4 (2.5 in mobile housing)	10	4.5	15
Maximum stocking rates in fixed housing (birds per m <sup>2</sup> )	6b/m <sup>2</sup>	10 b/m <sup>2</sup> (21Kg/m <sup>2</sup> max.live-weight)	2b/m <sup>2</sup>	10 b/m <sup>2</sup>	2 b/m <sup>2</sup>

At least one third of the house area must be a litter or bedded area. There are specifications also for slats, nest boxes and perches.

## Feed

Due to the small size of the market for organic poultry feeds, there is only one supplier in the Republic of Ireland. Organic feed is expensive. The ingredients must be certified to be free from genetically modified organisms. Almost all-organic producers require their feed supply to be bagged which further increases manufacturing costs (sacks, bagging, storage and handling). With only one supplier transport costs are high. There is a shortage of organic feed ingredients in Europe.

## Stock

Any of the commercial hybrids can perform reasonably well under organic conditions. In the case of egg production the egg pullets must be produced organically for at least 6 weeks prior to egg production and managed in compliance with organic standards for feed and space thereafter.

Chickens for meat production are produced at ages of 35 to 49 days in commercial production, while organic chickens are grown to 81 days. Slow growing strains are the preferred choice for organic production. The conformation of slow growing birds is different with a more elongated carcass, a higher proportion of leg and a lower proportion of breast. Since consumers prefer breast meat, this is to the disadvantage of organic production.

## Performance

Feed conversion efficiency (FCE) is a key measure of performance and in poultry terms it means the return of one unit of bodyweight for x units of feed. Chickens for example give FCE in the region of 3.0+/- : 1 i.e. for each 3.0kg of feed consumed bodyweight will increase by 1Kg. Turkeys are not so good – 3.5 : 1 approximately. (FCE is influenced by age, weight, nutrients and energy usage)

Poultry are highly responsive to good management. Prepare well. Knowledge and skills are important prerequisites to the establishment of an organic poultry unit.

## Further Training

Teagasc organises short education and training programme at any Teagasc centre where a group is interested, to equip people with the knowledge and skills to develop an organic poultry enterprise

**Produced by: Nuala King, Teagasc, Mellows Development Centre, Athenry, Co. Galway.**

**Email: [nuala.king@teagasc.ie](mailto:nuala.king@teagasc.ie) ☎ +353 (0)91 845200**