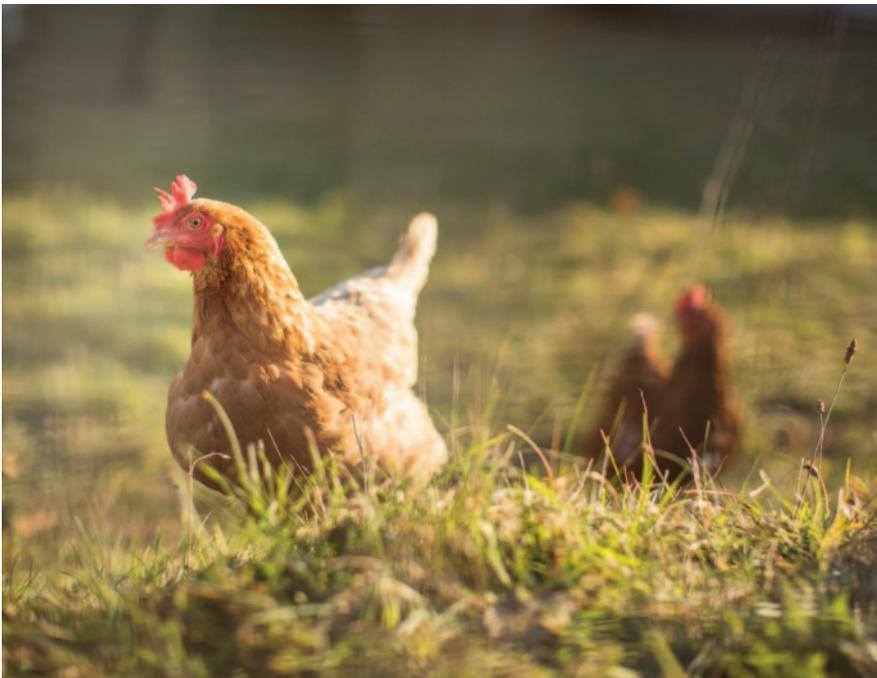


FREE-RANGE EGG PRODUCTION

Introduction



Free-range egg production is defined by the European Union.

The egg production industry has increased substantially in recent years, due to our growing population and a demand for protein foods. The sector is divided into four varying intensities: enriched cages; barn; free range; and, organic.

Free-range egg production is frequently referred to as an alternative system. The basic principle is simple. Birds have daytime access to a range, which is covered in vegetation.

Free-draining soil with a healthy growth of grass is ideal.

Free-range egg production is defined by the European Union. The EU lays down outdoor and indoor space requirements and other conditions for free-range production.

Regulations are implemented by the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine (DAFM), which is also the inspectorial body. The requirements of the voluntary egg

Assessment

It is essential to carefully assess each individual situation. Carry out an audit of resources on the farm. House location is important, as it must have access to an adequate range area. As a general principle, a purpose-built house is the ideal starting point. Mobile units are also available. Estimations must then begin. What will the capacity be? How much field area is required? Consideration of these key questions will ultimately lead to a focus on marketing.

Marketing

Eggs are highly perishable with a short shelf life. The markets and customers must be identified before embarking on a production unit. While this may not be essential for other areas of new business development, it is absolutely essential for perishable poultry and eggs. There are two fundamental questions to be addressed:

1. Will the business operate on the basis of a complete production and marketing unit?
2. Will the business link in with an established marketing unit and concentrate on the production of eggs alone?

If you are doing the marketing, that will be a major deciding factor for unit size. A market survey is necessary to establish market potential and accessibility. The production and marketing of free-range eggs is financially viable only when they command a premium price over mass-produced eggs.

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quality assurance scheme (e.g., Bord Bia Sustainable Egg Assurance Scheme (SEAS)), and other animal welfare groups (e.g., Freedom Foods), should also be considered and incorporated at the planning stage.

Understanding what's involved

Going into egg production means keeping laying hens at their optimum level of comfort from point of lay (≈16 weeks) to end of lay (70+ weeks). It involves the production and supply of fresh eggs.

Additional skills and a separate egg grading and storage room are required if grading and packing of eggs takes place on the unit. The eggs are then sold to wholesalers, retailers or direct to the final consumer at farm gate.

Costings

When the assessment is carried out and marketing possibilities are arrived at, then it is possible to address the question of costs. House cost will be the greatest part of the investment.

Houses will consist of a slatted area and a veranda or litter area. For small-scale production supplying farm gate sales or farmers' markets, the upgrading of an existing house is the more cost-effective option. Larger production units require state-of-the-art facilities, and can support repayments on borrowings for site preparation and the construction of a purpose-built house. Equipment for the flock will include feeders, drinkers, nest boxes and slats. It will also include feed storage provision and fencing. Automatic drinkers are essential regardless of flock size. Other equipment choice will be governed by flock size. Requirement for investment capital depends on the starting position on the farm, the scale of the enterprise and the degree of automation for the unit.



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Summary of legal requirements

All eggs offered for sale from free-range egg units must conform to the standards for eggs in general.

Additionally, eggs offered for sale in small packs bearing the words "free-range eggs" must be produced in poultry enterprises where:

- hens have continuous daytime access to open-air runs;
- the ground to which hens have access is mainly covered with vegetation; and,
- the maximum stocking density is not greater than 1,000 hens per hectare of ground available to the hens.

Further information

For further information please contact Rebecca Tierney, Poultry Advisor at:

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The following resources are also helpful:

www.agriculture.gov.ie/

www.bordbia.ie/

www.teagasc.ie/ruraldev

