

Organic Poultry Production in Ontario

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INTRODUCTION

Organic poultry production is a system of farm design and management practices for producing meat and eggs without the use of pesticides, synthetic fertilizers or antibiotics. For some producers, organic poultry production can be a good fit. There are many factors to consider before making the transition to organic production, including current and future demand, standards, certification requirements, production costs and lifestyle goals.

In 2020, 38 layer barns housing approximately 600,000 hens were certified as organic in Ontario, which represents about 6% of the Ontario layer production. In Canada, the production of chicken, eggs and turkey operate under supply management. This economic system matches domestic production to domestic consumer demand. In Ontario, Chicken Farmers of Ontario, Egg Farmers of Ontario and Turkey Farmers of Ontario are the commodity organizations that administer the supply management system in the province.

ORGANIC PRODUCTION DEFINED

The Canadian Food Inspection Agency administers legislation that regulates certified organic agricultural production in Canada.^[1] This legislation defines production practices that are acceptable

in an organic system. Products that meet all of the applicable national organic standards may be eligible for certification by an approved third-party certification body, and sold as “Certified Organic.” The regulations came into effect on June 30, 2009.

Organic Poultry Certification

For poultry products to be sold as organic, producers must be certified as organic. Basic certification requirements include:

- managing crop and pasture land without the use of synthetic fertilizers, genetically engineered (modified) organisms (GMOs), fungicides, herbicides or insecticides for 3 consecutive years
- maintaining accurate records for crop production practices, including machinery usage and cleaning, rented land and storage
- providing a comprehensive history of all land to be certified
- feeding 100% organic rations (with certain exceptions, such as minerals and essential ingredients that cannot be sourced as organic) to all birds in the flock
- being from poultry that has been under continuous organic management, beginning no later than the second day of life and having received no medication other than vaccines to treat fertilized eggs or day-old poultry

Before transitioning to organic production, contact an accredited certifying body and obtain the current certification requirements.

The period of time it takes to switch a poultry operation from conventional production to organic production is called the transition period. How long this takes depends on factors such as flock size, the size of the land base and previous farming practices. Complete organic certification generally requires a mandatory year of transition for the flock and pasture— the farm is operated as an organic operation for 1 full year before it is certified. During the transition time, the flock is kept according to organic production standards, but the products produced from this flock (meat and eggs) cannot be marketed as organic until the farm receives certification. In addition, pasture and other fields for feed crops must have been managed as organic for a minimum of 3 years on top of the mandatory 1 year of transition time.

CERTIFICATION

Canadian producers or processors who wish to produce, process and/or market agricultural products or foods as “Certified Organic” and identify them with the Canada Organic label (Figure 1) must hire an accredited certification body[2] to review their system and provide inspector oversight.

Specific production practices must be followed to qualify for Canadian certification. More detailed information can be found in the Canadian Organic Standards, which includes two documents:

- [Organic Production Systems: General Principles and Management Standards](#) (CAN/CGSB-32.310 - 2020)
- [Organic Production Systems: Permitted substances lists](#) (CAN/CGSB-32.311 - 2020)

Links to both documents can be found at the Canadian Food Inspection website:
www.inspection.gc.ca.



Figure 1. Being able to display the Canada Organic logo provides more opportunities for organic producers. (Courtesy of Canadian Food Inspection Agency)

PRODUCTION STANDARDS

For poultry products to be marketed as Certified Organic, specific production standards for feeds and feeding, breeding, production and health practices must be met.[3]

Feeds and Feeding Accepted Practices

- Poultry must be fed a balanced ration to meet the animals’ nutritional requirements essential to maintaining health and wellbeing.
- Poultry must be provided with organic feed. Organic feed crops must be produced in accordance with the organic standards and regulations.
- In the finishing phase, poultry shall be given both grain and vegetable matter.
- Poultry shall be fed daily. A “skip-a-day” feeding regime for breeding birds is prohibited.

Prohibited Practices

- Feed or feed additives or supplements that contain substances not in accordance with the Organic Feed Standards are prohibited.
- Feeding medications or veterinary drugs, including hormones and prophylactic antibiotics, to promote growth to birds for meat or egg production, is prohibited.
- Feeds chemically extracted or defatted with a prohibited substance are not allowed.

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- Mammalian or avian slaughter byproducts may not be fed to poultry.
 - Use of synthetic preservation agents, colouring agents, appetite enhancers or flavour enhancers is prohibited.

Breeding

- Natural methods of breeding must be used; artificial insemination is permitted.

PRODUCTION AND HEALTH

Practices

- Physical alterations are prohibited, unless they are essential for animal health, welfare or hygiene. If it is the only remaining option, minimal beak trimming or treatment to remove sharp hooks is permitted.
- Beak trimming of birds is permitted when it is necessary to control problem behaviour that has a negative impact on the welfare of other birds.
- Operators shall document the other measures taken to control or eliminate problem behaviour.
- Vaccines are permitted when it has been documented that the disease can be transmitted to other birds on the premises and cannot be combated by other means.
- Use of pharmaceuticals, antibiotics, hormones and steroids for preventive treatments is prohibited.
- Veterinary products are permitted as a last resort, following the rules found in *Organic Production Systems — Permitted Substances Lists (CAN/CGSB-32.311-2020)*.^[4]
- If permitted treatments are unlikely to treat an illness or injury, veterinary drugs or antibiotics may be administered under supervision of a veterinarian; however this meat cannot be sold as organic.
- Forced moulting of poultry is prohibited.

Housing Conditions

The operator shall establish and maintain poultry living conditions that accommodate the health and natural behaviour of poultry as follows:

- Keeping poultry in row, battery, enriched or colony cages is prohibited.
- Poultry shall be reared in open-range conditions and have free access to pasture, open-air runs and other exercise areas, subject to weather and ground conditions. Poultry barns shall have sufficient exits (pop out holes) to ensure that all birds have ready access to the outdoors.

Outdoor areas shall:

- be free of prohibited substances for 36 months prior to their use
- be covered with vegetation, seeded if necessary, and periodically left empty to allow vegetation to regrow and to prevent disease build-up. To facilitate rodent control, a vegetation-free perimeter around poultry houses is permitted.
- have effective overhead cover (for shade and protection from avian predators) distributed throughout the range area of barn-raised birds to encourage continual use by the birds. The cover may be natural (such as trees, shrubs and crops) or artificial (such as shade cloth, camouflage netting, screens or trailers). Roof overhangs over pasture may account for up to 50% of the required overhead cover if they are functional (i.e., they provide shade and protection from avian predators). By December 2023, operators shall submit a plan to ensure that this overhead cover shall represent at least 10% of the minimum required range area by December 2025.
- show signs of use as appropriate for the season
- be subject to restricted access in an emergency, when outdoor access results in an imminent threat to the health and welfare of poultry. Outdoor access shall resume when the imminent threat ends. Producers shall document periods of confinement.

GENERAL REQUIREMENTS FOR LAYERS

Layers may be confined during onset of lay, that is, until peak production is reached. The laying flock shall have outdoor access for at least one-third of its laying life.

Rearing facilities that closely match the conditions that exist in the layer barn are recommended.

Pullets, however, may be kept indoors until they are fully immunized. Layer flocks shall be limited to 10,000 birds. More than one flock may be in the same building if the flocks are separated and have separate runs.

Layers shall have access to an adequate number of nests and perches.

Enriched Verandahs for Barn-Raised Layers

Enriched verandahs shall be used when barn-raised layers do not have access to outdoor runs because of weather or disease constraints. An enriched verandah is a covered, uninsulated, unheated extension to a poultry barn. Birds shall have access to the enriched verandah year-round during daylight hours, at least from spring through fall.

The enriched verandah shall have an outdoor climate but offer protection from inclement weather (e.g., wind, rain), rodents, predators and disease threats. It shall also represent at least one-third of the footprint of the indoor barn area and have natural lighting that may be supplemented with artificial lighting. The verandah should have a sand floor, a dirt floor or a solid floor covered with bedding, such as straw or wood shavings, for comfort and warmth and to encourage foraging, scratching and dust-bathing behaviours. Enrichments should be offered (examples include perches, trays of greens, hay bales, pecking objects) to encourage natural behaviours.

The verandah shall not count towards indoor or outdoor space allowance. Enriched verandahs shall be provided in new construction for barn-raised layers. They shall be added to existing infrastructure when the operator cannot demonstrate that at least 25% of layers utilize the outdoor range when there are no weather or disease constraints.

GENERAL REQUIREMENTS FOR MEAT CHICKENS AND TURKEYS

Meat chickens that will be raised outdoors in shelters without indoor access shall have access to pasture on a daily basis by 4 weeks of age. Turkeys with a similar production system shall have outdoor access by 8 weeks of age. Access to pasture could be delayed if weather conditions endanger the health or safety of the birds.

Barn-raised meat chickens shall have outdoor access on a daily basis by at least 25 days of age when there are no weather constraints. Operators shall take measures to increase use of the pastures and outside exercise areas and have a goal of a minimum of 15% of birds on range when there are no weather constraints. Operators shall document

the use of the range and continue to strive to increase the number of birds on the range in future years. This will be reviewed by December 2025.

Parasite Control

Organic poultry operations shall have a comprehensive plan to minimize parasite problems. The plan shall include preventive measures, such as genetic selection, litter management, fecal monitoring and assessments of tissue at slaughter, and emergency measures in the event of a parasite outbreak.

Hygienic cleaning and disinfection methods for barns, such as power washing, steam washing, floor burning and lime washing, shall be included in the plan as well as the amount of down time (i.e., when the barn is vacant).

Laying hens that receive more than two parasiticide treatments in a 12-month period shall lose their organic status. Treatment of the flock, rather than individual hens, is permitted.

Meat poultry treated with a parasiticide or veterinary drug not listed in Table 5.3 of CAN/CGSB-32.311 shall be considered non-organic meat animals.

IS ORGANIC POULTRY PRODUCTION FOR YOU?

Becoming a certified organic poultry producer brings potential rewards along with challenges. The certified organic designation provides the opportunity to market a differentiated product that meets published standards and is backed by third-party certification. Producers may be able to link up with an already established production chain that preserves product identity to the consumer level. Consumers may be willing to pay a premium for the product.

Challenges to becoming an organic producer may include higher production costs, challenges sourcing organic feed, pasture and crop management, managing animal health and incurring a 2–3-year phase-in period to convert crop production to organic methods. Below are some questions to consider:

- Is there access to a suitable processor or grader where the organic product will command a premium?
- What changes are required to convert the current production system?
- What extra costs or reductions in productivity will these changes entail?

Then compare the potential benefits, costs and risks associated with changing over to organic production.

REFERENCES

1. Government of Canada. Organic Products. 2021. <https://inspection.canada.ca/organicproducts/eng/1526652186199/1526652186496>
2. Government of Canada. Canadian Organic Standards. 2020. <https://inspection.canada.ca/organic-products/standards/eng/1300368619837/1300368673172>
3. Government of Canada. Organic Production Systems: general principles and management standards. 2020. https://publications.gc.ca/collections/collection_2020/ongc-cgsb/P29-32-310-2020-eng.pdf
4. Government of Canada. Organic Production Systems: permitted substances lists. 2020. (CAN/CGSB-32.311-2020) https://publications.gc.ca/collections/collection_2020/ongc-cgsb/P29-32-311-2020-eng.pdf

RESOURCES FOR ORGANIC PRODUCTION

Canadian Food Inspection Agency
www.inspection.gc.ca

Canadian Organic Growers
www.cog.ca/

Chicken Farmers of Ontario
www.ontariochicken.ca/

Ecological Farmers Association of Ontario
www.efao.ca/

Egg Farmers of Ontario
www.getcracking.ca/

Ontario Ministry of Agriculture, Food and Rural Affairs www.ontario.ca/organic

Organic Agriculture Centre of Canada
www.dal.ca/faculty/agriculture/oacc/en-home.html

Organic Council of Ontario
www.organiccouncil.ca

Organic Federation of Canada
www.organicfederation.ca/index.html

Turkey Farmers of Ontario
turkeyfarmers.on.ca/

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