



Three Key Factors for Ensuring Flock Health

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In the past nine years, the CROPP Egg Pool has increased dramatically, from a handful of small producers in Vernon County back in 1994 to the over 40 producers in 4 different states representing over 140,000 birds in 2003. That's a lot of birds to keep healthy, especially using organic methods.

I've been asked to offer some suggestions concerning flock health. After looking into the subject, I was able to come up with a three-pronged approach to flock health: biosecurity, animal stress management, and dealing with disease. By no means does this guarantee that your flock will never fall ill (eventually everyone in the poultry industry is challenged if they're in the business long enough). However, by keeping the following suggestions in mind, maybe you will be able to prevent a costly disease from entering your flock and spreading through the rest of the pool.

Biosecurity

Limiting your flock from exposure to disease is an important aspect of preserving the health of your birds. Simple, oftentimes overlooked, procedures could be the difference between a healthy flock and a sick flock. Keeping an accurate record of your flock's history, vaccinating your birds, providing a clean, sound environment, practicing good sanitation and limiting human traffic on your farm are all important factors of a farm's biosecurity program.

A farm's biosecurity program is only as strong as its weakest link. One of the weaker spots in many CROPP producers' programs occurs during the clean-out phase of the flock. Many producers practice sound biosecurity programs throughout the year, including limiting visitors to their facilities, providing plastic boots to those that do visit, utilizing a farm flow chart and controlling rodent populations on the farm. However, during clean out, visitors are welcomed onto the premises to pick and choose their birds. This practice makes the current flock, as well as future flocks, vulnerable to foreign diseases and once a farm is infected, it's a challenge to regain its clean status.

Many diseases can be prevented well before the flock is threatened. By vaccinating birds at an early age, birds are able to build immunity against diseases that can be catastrophic during their productive lives. Before purchasing pullets ensure that your grower has administered an appropriate vaccination schedule during their rearing. If possible, check antibody titer results to ensure vaccines were properly administered and effective.

Stress Management

Despite the fact that the birds are given many liberties in their organic environment such as outdoor access and natural lighting that conventional birds could never have the opportunity to enjoy, the birds are still under a lot of unnatural stress. Let's face it, there's a huge difference between a chicken laying a clutch of around fifteen eggs once annually and laying over twenty

dozen eggs throughout the year. Stress is defined as anything that reduces resistance to disease so its important producers keep stress management in mind.

Stress can be caused by both the environment (chilling, heating, and excessive humidity) and by routine management procedures (beak tipping, vaccinating, placing pullets, etc). Stress management involves providing clean and dry litter, good ventilation, clean water and proper nutrition, and not crowding birds. Stress reduction includes avoiding the indiscriminate or improper use of medications and avoiding handling birds at critical times (after pullets have started to lay, after vaccinating and when the weather is extremely hot or cold).

When Disease Strikes

Always be on the lookout for symptoms or signs of disease. Any change in feed intake, water intake or rate of production, along with changes in posture, droppings and condition of the plumage may all be the first signs of disease. Be sure you know how your healthy flock looks, acts and smells so you can quickly determine the status of your flock.

If you notice anything unusual, contact your local veterinarian immediately. You may even consider taking blood samples from a sick bird or delivering a dead bird to your state veterinarian's diagnostics laboratory. In addition, call CROPP to inform them that your birds may be sick so extra precautions can be taken for your egg pick-up, including egg pick up rerouting and extra egg truck washing. The last thing you want to do is compromise the health of your fellow farmers' birds.

Once you've deciphered that your birds are sick you have three options; cull the affected birds, wait out the disease, or embark on a course of therapy. Culling birds means killing them and disposing of them properly and promptly (by either burying birds in a deep grave or by incinerating the carcasses). Oftentimes, if a disease is serious, it's best to cull all the birds at once, thoroughly clean and disinfect the facilities and prepare for the next flock. In some cases, mild diseases can be allowed to run its course through the flock with little impact on mortality or production. In even fewer cases, you can attempt to treat your birds. This is not recommended however in organic systems do to the limitations of organic-certified remedies.

In all three instances, it's advisable to vaccinate against the disease the flock was challenged with since the facilities may still harbor the disease and to prevent any reoccurrence. In addition, its also recommended that producers allow at least two weeks of down time between flocks, whether they were healthy or not, to allow microbes in the environment to break down naturally.

Conclusion

Many of the ideas presented in this article were derived from Gail Damerow's *The Chicken Health Handbook* (A Garden Way Publishing Book, 1994). This publication, along with a number of other helpful books and guides, are readily available to farmers, are easy to read and present useful ideas and information. Through good management practices and being aware and educated of the different challenges facing poultry producers, hopefully your birds will be able to live healthier (and more productive) lives.