

Hello all,

Because there are many Amish farmers producing organic eggs, and others without e-mail, we went to the expense to mail everyone a hard copy of the action alert below. But if you do have e-mail this version will make it easy to cut and paste information and click on the links necessary to make your voice heard...



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## **Send Your Comments to the National Organic Standards Board**

**Due April 10!**

### **Protect Family-Scale Organic Poultry Producers From a Factory Farm Takeover**

Your letters, testimonies and public comments to the National Organic Standards Board (NOSB) last fall paid off—but our struggle for meaningful animal welfare standards is not over!

The NOSB, which meets twice a year to advise the United States Department of Agriculture on organic policy and rulemaking, listened to our requests that organic laying hens be granted *real* outdoor access. The NOSB's Livestock committee proposed that chickens be required to have access to living soil beyond a lifeless enclosed porch, which will prevent *business as usual* for industrial-scale producers.

But the committee also caved to industry pressure—their initial recommendation of 3 ft.<sup>2</sup> per bird of outdoor space was reduced to 2 ft.<sup>2</sup> per layer and 1 ft.<sup>2</sup> per broiler in the current proposal. The proposal also exempts outdoor access for pullets younger than 12 weeks old.

Producers who are serious about organic livestock production can easily provide much more than 2 ft.<sup>2</sup> per bird outside—and consumers expect better living conditions for organic livestock.

Family-scale pullet producers currently let their young chickens out, to train them to use the outdoor space, anywhere from the age of 6-10 weeks—with some smaller operations as young as 4 weeks.

The committee's proposal will be voted on at the meeting at the end of April in Seattle. **Please send your comments to the NOSB today**—see below for more details on how to take action. The full NOSB proposal is available online, on the National Organic Program website.

We encourage you to submit comments online (see instructions below) but for your convenience, we have enclosed an envelope addressed to the National Organic Program in Washington, DC.

## **Information for Producers—The Committee Proposal**

### **Outdoor Access**

The proposal would outlaw porches as token outdoor access, and require at least 2 ft.<sup>2</sup> of outdoor space, on living soil and pasture, for organic hens (trucking in and placing dirt on top of concrete would not be permitted).

2 ft.<sup>2</sup> per bird would provide only slightly more space outdoors as is provided indoors. If all chickens were to be outside at the same time, there would not be enough room for them to run around freely without destroying the environment.

**While the prohibition of porches or tiny outdoor runs is positive, we need to ask for more than 2 ft.<sup>2</sup> per bird—not only is this the right thing to do in terms of animal welfare, but this is your job security—the factory farms can't do it!!!**

In the previous (woefully inadequate) proposal by the Livestock Committee (in 2009), 3 ft.<sup>2</sup> was proposed for both layers and broilers. Even this anemic number has been reduced by 33% in the latest version of the proposal.

Organic Valley (with more family farmers than any other outfit) requires 5 ft.<sup>2</sup> per bird outside. The European organic standards require 43 ft.<sup>2</sup> per bird outside.

The NOSB proposal also creates a double standard by requiring farmers with mobile housing to have over 50 ft.<sup>2</sup> for laying hens as opposed to the 2 ft.<sup>2</sup> surrounding fixed housing.

- **Cornucopia's position:** It seems inconsistent to expect a reasonable amount of outdoor space from producers with mobile housing (54 ft.<sup>2</sup> for layers and 43 ft.<sup>2</sup> for broilers), and yet expect so dismally little from producers with fixed houses.
  
- If commercial-scale producers at Organic Valley, with 1500-15,000 hens, can provide 5 ft.<sup>2</sup> (with the exception of their factory farm producers—hopefully, OV members will step in and put an end to this violation of consumer trust!), all commercial organic producers should be able to fulfill such a requirement.

- We would support a phase-in period of up to three years, if required, for this requirement in case farmers need to transition more land around their henhouses to organic.
- **If you are a producer:** Tell the Board how much outdoor space you grant your organic laying hens, and what you believe would be a reasonable standard for all organic egg producers.

### **Outdoor Access for Pullets**

The proposal would exempt pullets from outdoor access until they are 12 weeks old.

Pullets typically start laying eggs at the age of 17 weeks. If they are not trained to go outside starting at a younger age, they are unlikely to do so once they move to the egg laying barn. This does not meet consumer expectations—and we want to maintain strong consumer confidence and pricing.

It is important to remember that the law currently requires outdoor access for all organically raised livestock—including pullets. The proposed rule change would state exactly when they need to be outside.

- **Cornucopia's position:** The requirement for outdoor access should apply to pullets as young as 10 weeks old (many producers let their birds out at a much younger age).
- **If you are a producer:** Tell the NOSB if and when you let your pullets outside, or when the producer who supplies your pullets lets the young birds out (unless they are not currently abiding by the law that requires letting them out).

### **Outdoor Access in Cold Weather**

The proposal would exempt chickens from outdoor access in temperatures below 50 degrees Fahrenheit.

- **Cornucopia's position:** Producers should indeed be allowed to close their doors in freezing temperatures, to preserve heat inside the building in cold winters. However, many producers who grant real outdoor access also state that their birds love going outside, even in cool weather.

Note: The current regulations, along with the new proposals, will always allow farmers to "temporarily" confine their livestock due to weather conditions, the health of the animal or environmental factors (the operative word is "temporary").

## **Exit Areas**

The proposal states that bird must have “sufficient exit areas, appropriately distributed around the building, to ensure that all birds have ready access to the outdoors. Exit areas must allow the passage of more than one bird at a time.” The doors must be 5 feet per 1000 birds, and be at least 14 inches high.

- **Cornucopia’s position:** This proposal is positive. In nice weather, all birds should have the opportunity to go outside.
- **If you are a producer:** If you believe that chickens require more exit space, please share your thoughts with the NOSB.

## **Perches**

The committee notes that “Poultry mortality lessens when perches are provided because they encourage natural behaviors, strengthen bones via exercise, allow submissive birds to escape and reduce aggression.” In 2009, the NOSB voted to recommend, in 205.239(C)(1)(iii), that “Perches must be provided for all laying hens at not less than 6 inches per hen.”

The current stocking density chart conflicts with this previously adopted recommendation. The chart suggests that producers may provide perch space for 20% of birds.

- **Cornucopia’s position:** Perches should be a requirement for all birds. The stocking rate chart must be modified to reflect the previously adopted recommendation that 100% of birds be granted 6 inches of perch space.

## **Indoor Space**

The original proposal from the 2009 Livestock Committee granted 2 ft.<sup>2</sup> of indoor space per laying hen and 1.2 ft.<sup>2</sup> of indoor space per broiler. In the current proposal, space allowance per bird has decreased considerably, to 1.2 ft.<sup>2</sup> per layer (with 6 inches of perch space per bird) or 1.5 ft.<sup>2</sup> (with perch space for 20% of birds) and 1 ft.<sup>2</sup> per broiler.

1.2 ft.<sup>2</sup> per layer is the standard in conventional uncaged egg production. It appears that the NOSB Livestock Committee adopted language, sometimes verbatim, from some of the humane labeling organizations, which have lucrative financial relationships with industrial egg producers. Factory farm operators, and their "independent" animal welfare contractors, should

not be setting the standards for organics—if organic is to be the “gold standard” of humane animal husbandry, the standards should go beyond common conventional practices.

The largest namebrand marketer, Organic Valley, currently requires 1.75 ft.<sup>2</sup> of indoor space per bird, and this standard seems reasonable for all commercial organic egg producers.

The proposal also contains conflicting statements. Proposed language for 205.239(h)(1) states that “Birds in mobile poultry units are subject to the same minimum space requirement as housed birds.” Yet in the stocking rate chart, the proposal grants laying hens in mobile houses 1.5 ft.<sup>2</sup> per bird, but only 1.2 ft.<sup>2</sup> per bird in fixed housing if every bird is also granted at least 6 inches of perch space.

**This conflict in the proposed standards should be resolved by requiring 1.5 ft.<sup>2</sup> per bird inside for both fixed and mobile houses.**

- **Cornucopia’s position:** Barn birds should not be given less space than mobile birds; therefore, 1.5 ft.<sup>2</sup> inside should be the standard for all laying hens. Broilers should be granted no less than 1.2 ft.<sup>2</sup> per bird, as originally proposed by the Livestock Committee in 2009.
- **If you are a producer:** Share with the Board how much indoor space you grant your layers and broilers, and what you believe to be a reasonable standard for all producers.

### **Indoor Space Calculation**

The proposal states that “perching areas and nest boxes may not be used in the calculation of floor space.” Currently, some producers use multi-level aviary systems that are able to pack birds vertically in a building.

- **Cornucopia’s position:** The standards should specify that the calculation of indoor space should involve the building’s footprint only. We agree that perches and nest boxes may not be used in the calculation of floor space, and believe that multi-tiered systems and platforms should also be excluded from the indoor space calculation.

The proposal also states that porches and winter gardens may count toward the indoor space calculation.

- **Cornucopia’s position:** Porches and winter gardens should not be counted as indoor space, since these areas are not accessible to the birds during cold weather. Even in good weather, porches are often inaccessible to most birds. By counting porches as indoor space, it decreases the amount of space per bird inside the barn and could contribute to serious and unacceptable overcrowding.

## Take Action

The National Organic Standards Board is especially interested in hearing from producers, so when submitting your comment, please **identify yourself as an organic producer**.

**To submit your comment electronically, follow these instructions:**

1. Go to [www.regulations.gov](http://www.regulations.gov)
2. Choose "Submit a Comment"
3. Type AMS-NOP-11-0014 in the search box
4. Click on "Submit a Comment"

Submit your comment before the April 10 deadline.

**To submit your comment via mail:**

Address your comment to:

Ms. Patricia Atkins,  
National Organic Standards Board,  
USDA-AMS-NOP  
1400 Independence Ave., SW.,  
Room 2646-So., Ag Stop 0268,  
Washington, DC 20250-0268.

Identify the following docket number on your letter: AMS-NOP-11-0014.

**Tell your family and friends to submit their comments as well!**

**To speak in person at the NOSB meeting (important if you can make it):**

In addition to sending their written comments, organic farmers and consumers living in the Seattle area, or willing to travel, are encouraged to also sign up for a five-minute speaking slot at the meeting at the end of April. Individuals can find more information about the meeting, and can pre-register for a slot by April 10, 2011, by visiting "<http://www.ams.usda.gov/nosbseattleslots>" or by calling (202) 720-3252.

Please email "[cultivate@cornucopia.org](mailto:cultivate@cornucopia.org)" or call 715-514-2627 if you are planning on attending the Seattle meeting.

*For any questions regarding the new proposed USDA organic rules, or the new FDA safety regulations, or for help in preparing your written comments or testimony, please contact Charlotte Vallaeys: [vallaey@cornucopia.org](mailto:vallaey@cornucopia.org) or 978-369-6409.*

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