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U.S.

Organic Farming Rules Overhauled

Stricter rules cap years of industry fighting about proper ways to raise organic chickens, pigs and other animals



Chickens at Meadow Haven Farm, a certified organic farm in Sheffield, Ill. New regulations specify minimum space indoors and outdoors per organic hen, plus ban certain practices such as debeaking poultry. *PHOTO: DANIEL ACKER/BLOOMBERG NEWS*

By **KELSEY GEE**

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The government Thursday unveiled stricter federal rules governing organic livestock and poultry farmers, capping years of industry fighting about the proper ways to raise chickens, pigs and other animals.

The U.S. Department of Agriculture's proposed regulations set requirements for animals' space and ban certain rearing practices.

The number of organic producers has ballooned as consumer demand for organic food has risen, with the USDA putting the annual retail market at more than \$39 billion in 2014. But federal standards for producers remain broad. They require only that farmers

give animals enough space to exhibit natural behaviors, together with some type of outdoor access and certified organic feed.

The proposed rules lay out for the first time minimum indoor and outdoor space requirements for organic chickens, with many egg-laying hens needing the equivalent of 2 square feet per bird both inside and outside.

The plan also defines outdoor access, in an attempt to ensure that animals are able to dust-bathe, peck or root in soil, with turkeys, broilers and other meat birds allotted a square foot of space for every 5 pounds. Some organic producers and consumer groups complain of farmers that provide only covered porches, attached to large, enclosed sheds, for outdoor access.

The new requirements also bar practices such as debeaking poultry and docking cattle and hog tails, both used in conventional agriculture.

The update of rules dating to 2002 ensures that organic practices “better align with consumer expectations,” Miles McEvoy, deputy administrator of the USDA’s organic program, said in an interview. He said Americans “expect organic livestock to spend a considerable amount of their life outside during appropriate weather conditions, so we proposed to codify that in a measurable way.”

Dena Jones, director of the Animal Welfare Institute, a Washington, D.C.-based advocacy group, called the proposed regulations “desperately needed,” due to the wide variability in the level of animal care provided by organic and nonorganic producers.

“Some producers raise [organic] animals on pasture with high welfare, while others raise animals in a manner similar to conventional, intensive agriculture,” said Ms. Jones, who has lobbied for years to strengthen animal welfare requirements. She said the move is “a big step in the right direction” but added that the proposed rules are “not our ideal.”

Betsy Babcock, founder of organic egg producer Handsome Brook Farm in New York state, said she is pleased to finally see the proposed rules. However, she expressed frustration with some requirements, such as giving only 2 square feet of outdoor space for each bird.

“That space will turn to dirt rapidly” without more room for flocks to roam, preventing the growth of vegetation and insects that chickens could eat, she said. Her company requires that egg producers selling under its brand give hens nearly 109 square feet of

outdoor space each.

The proposed rules will be posted for public comment for at least 60 days before they would be phased in.

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