

Organic Food: USDA Asked To Decide If Organic Means Outdoor



DAVID MERCER 01/28/11 03:50 AM

CHAMPAIGN, Ill. — When the doors to the hen house open, the 14,000 chickens on Edwin Blosser's organic egg farm make a mad dash for the pasture outside, where they can scratch and peck in the dirt.

"It's just like an ocean of birds going out the doors — zoom!" Blosser said.

Greg Herbruck says his organic laying hens also love the outdoors — but they spend their time in the fresh air on concrete patios and in other enclosures.

The two farmers — both organic, both concerned about the well-being of their birds — exemplify a debate raging among organic devotees about how livestock should be raised. Some insist that organic means small farms, open space and fresh air. They want the U.S. Department of Agriculture to create new rules defining the conditions in which organic hens should be kept.

Others say such standards result in food that's out of reach for most Americans and using enclosures and other cost-saving techniques makes organics affordable.

"There are some groups that want every egg to be cage free," said Charlie Lanktree, chief executive of Eggland's Best, a Pennsylvania company that is one of the biggest organic brands in the nation and a buyer of Herbruck's eggs. "The economics of that whole thing would be that you might very well increase your cost for a dozen organic eggs from \$4 a dozen to seven or eight a dozen."

The USDA's current organic rules require all livestock to spend time outdoors so the animals can engage in what the agency calls "natural behavior." The rules don't specify how much space the animals should have or whether that space should be in a pasture, on a porch or in an enclosure.

On many large organic egg farms, hens spend their outdoor time on concrete patios or other areas in which there's no access to dirt or grass.

Critics say those birds might be eating organic feed, but they're being raised in conditions much like the ones on conventional farms. They say that's not what consumers envision when they buy organic eggs, which often come in misleading packages.

"These marketers know exactly what consumers are looking for, and that's why they've got the pastoral scenes of red barns and chickens out on grass," said Mark Kastel, one of the founders of The Cornucopia Institute, a pro-organic watchdog group based in Wisconsin. The Cornucopia Institute is among the groups pushing a USDA advisory panel to take the matter up at an April meeting. USDA spokeswoman Soo Kim said no decision has been made yet on whether it will do so.

The pro-pasture groups include the Humane Society of the United States. It says the USDA's current rules allow food produced using a wide range of methods to carry the organic label, lessening its value.

"You could have producers who actually give pasture to their animals being treated the same as folks who don't give their animals any meaningful access to the outdoors," said Paul Shapiro, a spokesman for the Humane Society's Factory Farming Campaign.

Blosser, who farms in Tampico, Ill., said he believes "the spirit" of the law requires the animals to spend some time in a pasture.

"And second," he said, "we just think it's a better way to raise birds. Even though it's more work, we think it's more healthy."

Herbruck, who has about 900,000 organic laying hens on his family's farm in Saranac, Mich., disagreed. He said his hens are protected from disease-carrying rodents and other things they could come into contact with if the hen houses opened right onto pasture. He also said large numbers of chickens running around on grass and dirt results in large amounts of manure that, in that setting, can be difficult to remove and control.

"We need an impervious surface as part of the outside access so we can clean and disinfect it," Herbruck said. "You can't clean dirt."

Those arguments haven't been good enough for The Cornucopia Institute. It filed complaints with the USDA last fall, accusing a handful of farmers of not living up to the organic standard for outdoor access. On Thursday, it added a complaint against Herbruck, arguing his patios also don't meet the standard.

"There's nothing illegal with what they're doing," Kastel said. "It's just illegal to label it organic."

Herbruck said he hadn't seen the complaint and couldn't comment. Kim said the USDA is looking into the complaints.

Kastel said he'd be satisfied if farmers like Herbruck labeled their eggs "raised with organic feed" or something else that didn't put them on the same level as Blosser and others who give hens pasture time. He's made that proposal, he said, but never gotten a response.

Meanwhile, the issue concerns some consumers enough that they've changed their buying habits. Jon Bowermaster of Urbana, Ill., calls himself a political conservative and was shopping recently at a large chain grocery store. Yet he said he's so concerned about his eggs, he'll only buy them from a small, local farm where he's seen the chickens roaming around outside.

"I know that animals, when they're stressed, aren't healthy," he said. "I know cage-free is often a gazillion chickens running around (inside) on the floor."