

# USDA Intervenes To Force Organic Chicken Farmers To Be More Humane

By ACSH Staff — April 13, 2016



Poultry via [Shutterstock](#) [1]

If you subscribe to marketing blurbs created by Organic Consumers Association and other industry-funded groups, one of the underlying principles of the organic movement is that better tasting, higher-quality and even more ethical food can be produced if you're willing to pay for it. But as the market has ballooned to be a \$100 billion Big Organic industry in its own right, shoppers are increasingly aware the only thing they are getting is the same products at a much higher cost.

When it was just a niche process, the U.S. Department of Agriculture was content to let a small board of organic lobbyists control what constitutes an "organic" label and what does not, but more recently they have been asserting regulatory control to curb advertising claims and let the public know they are getting what they are paying for. An organic shopper might assume, for example, that the organic label means chickens and eggs are produced more ethically than other kinds - but that really isn't so, and for that reason USDA unveiled [proposed guidelines](#) [2] that would change existing organic livestock and poultry-handling procedures, mandating fresh air and ventilation in poultry houses, as well as the prohibition of beak removal and tail-cutting.

Organic farmers need to be told not to do what conventional industry already knows? Indeed, they obey only the letter of their process label requirements - and they write them. At least for now. The proposal would require an increase in living space for the poultry, so that each chicken would have room to turn around, stretch their limbs, stand up and lie down. They would also have to have access to clean water and be 'encouraged' to go outside -- daily.

Who is objecting? The organic community. They are fine with higher costs, like new labels, for their competitors, but balk when it comes to their own costs and profits. And they don't think any of the proposals by USDA will actually improve anything. Organic farmers think "free-range", even for a few minutes a day, is overrated, at a time when conventional chicken farming has embraced it.

One of the most important and controversial aspects of the USDA proposal requires that poultry have access to areas at least half-covered in soil, as well as access to areas that deliver direct sunlight, and shade -- and that comes at a high cost. Owners of poultry farms seeking to raise

organic chickens would be faced with re-designing their buildings, an expense that would be passed along to consumers and result in lower market share.

"The proposal," said Jim Byrum, president of the Michigan Agri-Business Association, "makes deeply unrealistic assumptions about food safety, requiring direct exposure of hens to the outdoors," in speaking with [U.S. News and World Report](#) [3].

The USDA defends its stance, touting the marketing claims about the high quality of organic poultry and the perception by shoppers it must be more ethical.

"By strengthening standards for organic livestock and poultry, we are ensuring that we meet consumer expectations and maintain the integrity of the organic seal to support the sector's continued growth," AMS Administrator Elanor Starmer said in [a press release](#) [4].

Just this once, organic farms may be technically correct, even if the activist community embraces what USDA is implementing. Greater outdoor access may also increase the public's exposure to salmonella, which can cause diarrhea, fever and sometimes produce even fatal outcomes. An infected chicken can infect more chickens and hens with the more time they spend outside.

And organic consumers could be getting less meat per dollar spent. Purchasing trends nationwide saw more chicken parts, and less whole birds, being purchased, which prompted farmers to raise poultry in windowless sheds under artificial light, which induced greater hunger and made their birds fatter. The USDA's requirement to provide additional space for poultry would force the industry to move away from this model, with lighter chickens likely being raised.

If this proposal is passed and consumers experience higher costs and a higher risk of salmonella infection, many might question whether these changes were worth it. Treating chickens better may be a worthy goal to some, but consumers in general will be picking up the tab for this added free-ranging. And there's nothing free about that.

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[2] <https://www.ams.usda.gov/rules-regulations/organic-livestock-and-poultry-practices>

[3] <http://www.usnews.com/news/business/articles/2016-04-07/usda-proposes-strictier-animal-welfare-rules-for-organic-meat?source=acsh.org>

[4] <https://www.ams.usda.gov/press-release/usda-issues-proposed-rule-amend-organic-livestock-and-poultry-practices-including>