

## CHICKEN SURVEY



A roast chicken – served with potatoes, gravy and all the trimmings – is a classic British dish. But there is a bewildering array of birds to choose from for your Sunday roast. What are the differences between organic birds and their non-organic 'free-range' cousins? And do all chickens with an organic label benefit from the same welfare standards? In our membership magazine, *Living Earth*, and through our website, we asked for your help to make life better for chickens. Firstly by telling us what you expect of welfare standards when you buy an organic or 'free-range' chicken. Secondly to ask your retailer: how animal-friendly were the farming practices involved?

Last year our survey improved supermarkets' UK sourcing of organic food. This year's survey looks set for a similar success by encouraging supermarkets to raise their welfare standards for chickens. We received over 200 completed questionnaires between November and January – a huge thank you to you all. Your answers show that you expect high animal welfare standards when buying an organic or non-organic 'free-range' chicken. But does the reality meet your expectations? And how willing or able were retailers to divulge these all-important answers?

### The survey

- Of 216 completed surveys, 63% (137) bought organic chickens and 71% of those were Soil Association certified. Out of the 79 non-organic birds, 50 were labelled 'free-range'.
- Over 90% buying both organic and 'free-range' expected flock sizes of no more than 1,000 birds.
- Over 96% expected their 'free-range' birds to have been able to range outside.
- 70% of organic chickens and about two-thirds of all birds came from supermarkets and the rest were bought direct from the farmer or from independent retailers.

## **Our survey said**

A chicken's environment is fundamental to its health and welfare. It is vital that chickens have plenty of space, fresh grass (to prevent the build-up of diseases in the soil) and shelter so they can express their natural behaviour and stay healthy. So we asked about your expectations of the chicken's freedom to roam on quality pasture, and flock sizes.

Those buying organic and 'free-range' meat had similar expectations of welfare. Everyone who bought an organic chicken, and 96% of 'free-range' consumers, expected their bird to have been able to run around outside. And over 90% of organic and 'free-range' consumers expected their chicken to have been reared on fresh grass, in a flock of no more than 1,000 birds.

## **And the truth?**

How did the retailer respond to questions about your chicken's welfare? Sadly, very few would, or could, provide correct information. We found that half of our respondents who contacted retailers were unable to get any information at all about flock size and access to good pasture, for both organic and 'free-range' birds.

Two of our respondents reported that Tesco refused to give information about flock size or outside access, which rather undermines confidence in claims that its organic birds "get to roam freely on lush organic pasture".

The retailers who gave information did not always do so accurately. Most retailers had little idea how high our standards are, telling customers that, nine times out of ten, Soil Association chickens are reared in flocks of 1,000 or fewer. Maximum flock size for our meat birds is 1,000 so we actually score ten out of ten. However most of our meat birds are in groups of 500 or fewer.

Our standards for laying hens are different. Laying hens need two and a half times more pasture (10m<sup>2</sup> per bird) than meat birds because they range further. Here again we recommend 500 birds but, given more outside space per bird, they can be kept in flocks of up to 2,000.

Back to our meat-bird survey. Shops gave incorrect information about other organic certifiers too, in some cases giving credit where none was due. According to them, 58% of chickens certified by Organic Farmers & Growers (UK2) were reared in groups of 1,000 or fewer. In fact most non-Soil Association organic chickens are reared in far larger flocks, some with as many as 9,000 birds. Huge flocks make it hard for birds to leave the shed and roam on fresh pasture.

As for your high expectations for non-organic chickens labelled 'free-range', they too fell short. Often reared in flocks of several thousand birds, they can be fed on GM crops. See our table for the

different standards.

So 'free-range' does not always mean what it says on the tin, and not all organic birds are reared the same. All organic chickens are fed on a GM-free diet rich in organic cereals, and cannot be given routine doses of antibiotics to keep them 'healthy'.

However, our standards insist that Soil Association chickens are reared in smaller flocks and spend more of their lifetime outdoors on fresh pasture. Furthermore, the Soil Association is the only certifier to insist on additional inspections on its livestock farms, thanks to a new system developed by the University of Bristol to monitor and improve the welfare of farm animals. Our welfare standards may go further than most, but they can improve and we are not complacent.

#### **Guide to chicken meat standards**

|                                   | <b>Soil Association*</b>                                                                 | <b>Other organic certifiers</b>                                                  | <b>Free-range (non-organic)**</b>           |
|-----------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------|
| <b>Flock size</b>                 | 500 recommended, but up to 1,000 are allowed where farmers can show high welfare         | 4,800 birds, but relaxations in the standards mean there can be as many as 9,000 | No upper limit. Typically many thousands.   |
| <b>Time spent roaming outside</b> | Outside access for at least 2/3 of lifetime                                              | Outside access for at least 1/3 of lifetime                                      | Outside access for at least 1/2 of lifetime |
| <b>Fresh grass</b>                | Pasture rested for an extra year in every three months (+ at least two months each year) | Pasture rested for at least two months a year                                    | No requirements for resting land            |
| <b>Outside space</b>              | 4m <sup>2</sup> per bird                                                                 | 4m <sup>2</sup> per bird                                                         | 1m <sup>2</sup> per bird                    |

\* Other organic certifiers with similar high standards to the Soil Association include the Biodynamic Agriculture Association (Demeter) and the Scottish Organic Producers Association (SOPA)

\*\* Applies to the majority of non-organic 'free-range' chickens. If labelled 'traditional free-range', flocks are no bigger than 4,800 birds.

#### **Insist on welfare**

Our survey shows that you expect high animal welfare standards for both organic and 'free-range' birds, and, sadly, many retailers are failing to match these expectations. When it comes to organic chickens sold in UK shops, less than a third is produced to Soil Association standards – the ones you expect.

We will be contacting all the supermarkets with these results, urging them to stock Soil Association chickens, if they do not already. We will also provide them with accurate information about the different welfare standards so they can provide their customers with the facts.

The best places to shop are independent shops, box schemes, farm shops or farmers' markets, many of which have first-hand knowledge of their chickens' welfare. Buying direct from the farmer can also save you money.

The only supermarkets currently selling Soil Association certified organic chicken meat are Sainsbury's, Somerfield, Budgens and Morrisons. Some supermarkets may stock cheaper organic chickens – but at a price for animal welfare. Other organic certifiers with similar high standards include the Biodynamic Agriculture Association (Demeter) and the Scottish Organic Producers Association (SOPA) – so look out for their labels too.

If your retailer does not already stock Soil Association chicken meat, ask them to. We want you to have chickens to match your expectations.