

What are the outdoor access and temporary confinement requirements for organic poultry?

*The organic standards require that the living conditions for organic poultry accommodate their health and natural behavior, including year round access to the outdoors. This document focuses on the outdoor access requirement, but the farmer and the certifying agent must evaluate **all** of the criteria for the animal's living conditions specified by the standards.*

What are the general requirements for outdoor access for poultry?

According to the USDA organic regulation 7 CFR 205.239, the outdoor access area must provide year round access to the outdoors, including:

- Shade
- Shelter
- Exercise areas
- Fresh air
- Clean water for drinking
- Direct sunlight suitable to the species, its stage of life, the climate and the environment.

Continuous total confinement of any animal indoors is prohibited.

Shade, shelter and exercise areas should be large enough for and designed to accommodate all birds that would use them in the course of their natural behavior. Examples of features that accommodate natural behavior could include vegetation to encourage foraging, ponds for waterfowl to swim in, objects to perch on and/or provide cover from predators, or blinds to hide from aggressive flock mates.

What do I need to consider for daily and long term management of an outdoor access area?

Daily management includes making sure that the animals have *access* to an approved outdoor area, and that clean water is accessible. Once an outdoor access area is established it must be managed according to the provisions of the organic standards so that all criteria are maintained.

Long-term management of the outdoor access area typically requires focus on whether the manure management requirements are being met, and whether there is any potential for soil or water contamination. Many organic producers cycle their animals through multiple paddocks or outdoor access areas so that areas have time to rest, vegetation to grow back, and manure to be cleaned up and hauled away.

Note that the organic standards require that the farmer manage manure in a manner that does not contribute to contamination of crops, soil, or water by plant nutrients, heavy metals, or pathogenic organisms and optimizes recycling of nutrients and must manage outdoor access areas in a manner that does not put soil or water quality at risk.

What size must my outdoor access area be?

The organic standards do not specify square footage required for outdoor access areas. It is the responsibility of the certifying agent to determine if the outdoor access area is adequate and the certifying agent will utilize the criteria in the organic standards to make such a determination.

In what situations can my poultry be temporarily confined?

The standards do allow for poultry to be temporarily confined for the reasons below. None of these reasons are grounds for the continuous confinement of any animals. Temporary confinement is acceptable in these conditions:

- Inclement weather
- The animal's stage of life (for example – chicks confined to a brooder or not yet feathered)
- Conditions under which the health, safety, or wellbeing of the animal could be jeopardized (an imminent threat from predators, or contagious illness such as avian flu)
- Risk to soil or water quality
- Preventive healthcare procedures or the treatment of illness or injury
- Sorting or shipping animals and livestock sales *provided that* the animals are maintained under continuous organic management, including organic feed, throughout the extent of their allowed confinement
- During breeding *except that* bred animals shall not be denied access to the outdoors
- For participation in public agricultural social events such as 4-H fairs, or youth projects such as Future Farmers of America, *provided that* the animal is confined for no more than one week prior to the event, through the event and up to 24 hours after the animals have returned to the farm at the conclusion of the event. Continuous organic management, including organic feed, must have been maintained during the extent of their allowed confinement.

Inclement Weather

The reasons for confining animals during inclement weather reasons will vary by the location of the farm. For some, inclement weather events may be thunderstorms, for others snowstorms, for others, **abnormally** low or high daytime temperatures. Normal cold weather that occurs in the late fall/winter/early spring is **not** considered to be inclement weather, and is not cause for confinement.

Farmers should disclose the inclement weather events they expect to encounter in their organic system plan. For any unexpected weather events, farmers should record those events and disclose them to their certifying agent at their annual inspection.

Other conditions under which the health, safety, or well being of the animal could be jeopardized

Note that section 205.239 of the organic standards also makes a general allowance about temporarily confining animals under conditions that might affect their health, safety and well-being. Two examples that may justify temporary confinement are as follows:

Predators/Predation

Having organic poultry in outdoor areas may increase the threat of predation from a host of predators – weasels, foxes, bears, dogs, hawks, etc. Poultry farmers routinely have to deal with these predators and during these events the animals may be temporarily confined because their wellbeing and safety is jeopardized. It should be noted that use of temporary confinement is only acceptable if there is an **immediate** predator threat; confinement of poultry during seasons or timeframes when predators are generally active is not acceptable. It is up to the poultry farmer to design a production system that protects birds from predators and allows them access to the outdoors.

Avian Influenza

During avian influenza outbreaks poultry may be confined per the instructions of a state's public health bureau. This is typically allowed. Normally the certifying agent will be aware of these outbreaks. Farmers should contact their certifying agent when concerned about the potential of an avian influenza outbreak.

What records should I keep with regard to temporally confining my poultry?

In general organic farmers should keep records of any date that they confine their organic animals and reason for temporarily confining their animals. Those records will be reviewed at the farm's annual organic inspection.

What happens when a certifying agent reviews my organic certification plan with regards to my outdoor access area?

In reviewing an organic certification plan, the certifying agent will evaluate outdoor access areas and the farmer's plans for temporary confinement of animals. Certifying agents will ensure that all of the criteria required by the standards are being met. These inspections happen at the initial organic certification inspection, and annual inspections thereafter.

Can my outdoor access area be a field or pasture with its own grasses? If so, does the field itself have to be inspected or certified organic?

Yes. Any outdoor access area, whether a field or pasture, has to be free of prohibited substances for three years and certified as part of the organic system plan.

For Further Reading & Questions

The full text of the [USDA organic regulations](#) can be found online at the U.S. Government Publishing Office (GPO) website in the Electronic Code of Federal Regulations (e-CFR).

Specifically, this regulatory section may be helpful to those with questions about outdoor access and temporary confinement guidelines for animals:

[7 CFR 205.239](#) Livestock Living Conditions

For general information about the National Organic Program, visit www.ams.usda.gov/nop.

Further questions may be directed to your certifying agency.

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