

FREE RANGE EGGS

According to opinion polls, a large percentage of people disapprove of the 'factory farming' of chickens and pigs. This provides a marketing opportunity as consumers turn to free range eggs and meat as humane alternatives to intensive production systems – and because they taste better. Most consumers believe that hens laying free range eggs spend much of their lives outdoors, and lay their eggs in individual nests. But some egg producers think about things differently. To them, free-range means that hens are uncaged, yet confined indoors in crowded sheds similar to broiler houses which raise meat birds in six weeks. Governments do nothing to regulate the use of terms like free range. The truthfulness of even vague claims of free range are rarely verified. There is no specific legal definition to give consumers confidence in the term.

At Freeranger Eggs in Grantville, our hens have free access to pasture, roaming over the paddocks during daylight. Most of the chooks lay in nest boxes in mobile roost houses which are moved every few days to maintain pasture growth.

The roost houses provide a safe haven from fox attack but the flocks have additional protection by patrolling Maremma dogs, which means that the hens don't have to be locked up - even at night. As well as unrestricted access to pasture (with all the worms, spiders and insects they can find) a mash made from a variety of grains is available at all times. Natural feeds are always important with the risk of diseases spreading through processed stock feeds and crossing to humans in the food chain. The feed we use contains no meat meal, which is a huge risk factor throughout the world. The protein content of our feed is maintained at 17.5% and we use no colouring additives or chemical inputs. Because of our low stocking density and small individual flock sizes of 200-300 birds, chemical parasite controls are rarely necessary and we prefer to use natural products like cider vinegar and diatomaceous earth.

A free range egg farm is more than having a few hens running around a paddock. Free range is more labour intensive and therefore most expensive than using a factory production system. Meeting all labelling, packaging and food safety laws also increases overheads.

Hen Welfare

Accepted standards and practices are based on the **Farm Animal Welfare Council's "five freedoms"**

1. **Freedom from hunger and thirst** – by ready access to fresh water and a diet to maintain full health.
2. **Freedom from discomfort** – by providing an appropriate environment including shelter and a comfortable resting area.
3. **Freedom from pain, injury or disease** – by prevention as well as rapid diagnosis and treatment
4. **Freedom to express normal behaviour** – by providing sufficient space, proper facilities and company of the animal's own kind
5. **Freedom from fear and distress** – by ensuring conditions and treatment which avoid mental suffering.

Natural behaviour for laying hens requires the ability to roam widely in search of insects, dust bathe, wing flap and socialise with other hens. Because our hens are not beak trimmed or mutilated in any way they are able to follow their natural instincts.

The free range system follows natural poultry keeping methods to ensure that the hens are healthy and free. Outdoor stocking density is limited to provide environmental sustainability.

Farming operations with no adverse off-site impacts, using sustainable land management practices allows long term viability without compromising economic returns. Factors such as no nutrient run off from paddocks, protecting native vegetation to maintain regional biodiversity and having no chemical inputs all help to keep the farm productive well into the future.

Sale of Eggs

Councils have adopted guidelines to ensure eggs are safe for human consumption. All egg producers selling directly to the general public must be registered under the Food Act with their local council. This includes selling eggs at the farm or at local markets. An application form for registration must be submitted to Council with payment of the required fee. Council Health Officers conduct an inspection at least annually to ensure compliance with the requirements. All egg producers also must be registered with the Department of Environment and Primary Industries – and from November 2014 all eggs sold must be stamped with a farm identification code.

Transport and Egg Storage

After collection eggs must be stored and transported to avoid excessive temperature fluctuations at all stages until they reach the consumer. Temperatures should be kept below 20°C.

Egg Grading

Each egg should be visually checked so that the quality of eggs being sold is maintained. The eggs must be candled to visually check for cracks, blood spots and air cell size which indicates the freshness of the egg.

Eggs must be labelled with the name of the packer or producer. Eggs should not be dirty or stained. Shells should not be cracked, thin, rough or misshapen. They should be free from blood or meat spots. Eggs are to be graded by weight and labelled. Egg cartons are to be stamped with a legible 'best before' date.

Details on the type of egg production – free range, barn laid or cage – must be printed on the egg carton to inform consumers.

Selling Eggs

When taking eggs to markets or retail outlets, the eggs are to be kept cool – this may be done by storing the cartons in ice boxes or under refrigeration to maintain the eggs at a safe temperature.

The Egg Industry

Free Range layer farms vary in size but the average is about 12,000 hens. True free range hens are fed on quality cereals – maize, wheat and other grains. We feed no meat meal or tallow in the diet, no colouring additives are mixed with the feed. Free range hens add to their ration by grazing on grass in the paddocks and any insects, spiders, worms or grubs they scratch out of the soil.