

What is free range?

From consumer research carried out at Farmers' Markets, a definition that most buyers seem to accept is: '*Free-range chickens are able to spend most of their time outdoors. They should not be beak trimmed. The hens should not be confined to small areas. True free-range flocks are generally fed and watered inside and outside their roosting sheds*'.

This encourages the birds to spend most of their time outdoors and keeps the laying sheds cleaner and drier. If fences confine the birds to small areas, the farm shouldn't be described as free-range, and neither should those where the hens are beaked trimmed and mainly kept inside sheds.

The broader egg industry view is that the term '*free range*' applies to any poultry with access to an outdoor area, no matter how few birds actually go outside and how uninviting their outdoor paddock is.

Free range hens should be able to gather a significant portion of their daily nutritional requirements from the range and there is no need for supplementary feed to contain colouring additives to enhance yolk colour. There is also no need for meat meal to be included in the ration. The meat meal used is often derived from dead poultry which can be either male chicks from the hatcheries or 'spent' hens which are culled at the end of their first laying season.

Traditional free-range egg production is just part of a diversified farm. It enables a farm to make full use of nutrients from the chicken manure. And it adds to the sustainability of the farming enterprise. Many free range farms use portable hen houses, either on wheels or on skids. They can be moved around with a tractor to prevent the ground around the houses becoming muddy. This is the traditional approach we use at the Freeranger Farm. There is a trend towards using mobile electric poultry netting combined with frequent shed moves probably every 1-3 days. Moving the sheds is labour intensive but it helps to maintain pasture growth. With low stocking density, even if the houses are left in place for several weeks at a time, a scattering of bare rectangles every now and then on the pasture is not significant. The grass will regrow over the season. By feeding the hens outdoors and moving the feeders regularly, it's possible to get most of the effect of moving the houses, but with less effort. It's clearly much more labour-intensive than the '*free-range*' techniques most big operators use, so it is a more costly method of production – which is why the big producers don't want a legal definition of '*free range*' to limit flock sizes and prohibit beak trimming..

Chickens love shade. It keeps them cool, out of the wind, and protects them from eagles, hawks and owls. Plantings of things like Kangaroo Apples, corn, kale, and sunflowers are suitable in the range areas, and native grasses can help to boost protein levels (as well as being drought tolerant to maintain green feed for most of the year). Adding plants like purslane in the pasture can boost Omega 3 levels in the eggs.

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<http://freerangereggs.blogspot.com>

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