GETTING STARTED GUIDE

Free Range Certification for Laying Hen Producers

WHO IS THIS GUIDE FOR?

This guide is for egg producers who are new to free range certification and want to understand what is required, how to prepare for an audit and what to prioritize first. It covers the updated Free Range Audit Standards.

QUICK FACTS: WHAT YOU NEED TO KNOW

REQUIREMENT	STANDARD
Outdoor space (free range)	2 sq ft per bird minimum at all times
Days outdoors	Minimum 275 days per year (max 90 days indoor due to weather)
Hours outdoors	Minimum 8 hours per daylight day, weather permitting
Living vegetation	25% of accessible range at time of audit
Pop-hole size	Min. 35 cm × 40 cm; max 18” from ground (ramp if taller)
Shade/cover	Required at least 2 distance points from the house, 0.05 sq ft per bird minimum
Outdoor water	Must be functioning and accessible to the birds
Dustbathing area	Must be present in the outdoor area
Outdoor enrichment	At least 1 enrichment types beyond first 1/3 of range
Bird distribution	Max 80% of outdoor birds within first 1/3 of house wall
Records	Daily mortality, twice-daily outdoor inspection, Exterior Access SOP

STEP 1 ASSESS YOUR CURRENT SETUP

Before anything else, walk your farm and measure the following. Use the checklist below to identify gaps.

Outdoor space

- Measure your total outdoor range area in square feet
- Divide by your flock size to confirm you meet 2 sq ft/bird

Pop-holes

- Count all pop-holes and measure: each must be at least 35 cm high × 40 cm wide
- Confirm minimum of 2 pop-holes per house, distributed across walls facing the range
- Measure height from ground: if more than 18 inches, you need a ramp or step platform
- Check that a dry, firm apron (gravel, woodchip or concrete) exists outside each pop-hole

Vegetation & ground

- Walk the full range and estimate the proportion of living vegetative cover
- Your goal is 25% living vegetation at the time of any audit
- Note any bare, waterlogged or heavily soiled areas that need remediation

Shade & enrichment

- Check that shade or overhead cover exists beyond first 1/3 of the space beyond the house wall, 0.05 sq ft per bird
- There must be shade at least 2 different distance points from the house
- There must be dustbathing areas
- Identify what enrichment items you have outside — you need at least 1 type from the permitted categories

Water

- Confirm at least one functioning and accessible water source is installed in the range area

STEP 2 SET UP YOUR REQUIRED DOCUMENTATION

Documentation is checked at every audit. Setting this up early saves significant stress. Here is what you must have on file:

Exterior access Standard Operating Procedure (SOP)

This is a written document and it must cover all of the following:

- How shade, cover and predator screening in the outdoor area is maintained
- How birds are protected from predators and wild birds, and secured in the house at night
- Daily procedures for opening and closing outdoor access (minimum 8 hours daylight access)
- The specific weather conditions under which birds will be secured indoors
- How dustbathing substrate is maintained outdoors
- Active management protocol for fixing damaged/waterlogged ground and supporting vegetation regrowth

Daily records

- Daily mortality log — record number of deaths and cause where known
- Twice-daily outdoor inspection record — confirm birds have range access, note any issues ; maintain annual records covering at least one full production year, with total weather-related indoor days not exceeding 90 per year
- Indoor confinement log — record any days birds are kept in due to weather and record reasoning for being kept indoors
- Vet-directed confinement log (should be a separate document than the typical 90-day weather confinement)

Rotational grazing / reseeding plan

A written plan must be on file and current. It must include:

- A reseeding or rotation plan
- Active implementation records: field maps, seeding records or grazing diaries
- A strategy for maintaining vegetation cover through adverse weather seasons

Mortality thresholds

- Work with your flock veterinarian to set expected daily mortality thresholds and document these in your flock health plan
- Any mortality spike (2× baseline for 3+ consecutive days) must be documented with a cause and management response

Annual confinement records

- Maintain records covering at least one full production year showing days birds were confined indoors due to weather
- Total weather-related indoor days must not exceed 90 per year

STEP 3 PREPARE FOR THE AUDITOR VISIT

Auditors will visit your farm annually. Here is what they will check on the day of the audit:

What the auditor will observe

AUDIT ITEM	WHAT THE AUDITOR IS CHECKING
Pop-holes	Measured and confirmed to meet minimum size; ramps in place if needed; aprons dry and clear
Outdoor area	Fenced, well-drained rest area present
Vegetation cover	At least 25% living vegetation across accessible range
Shade/cover	Present beyond first 1/3 from house, at 2 distance points
Enrichment	At least 1 type present beyond first 1/3 of range; intact and usable
Outdoor water	At least 1 functioning and accessible source visible in range area
Bird distribution	Auditor will walk through outdoor area for at least 5 minutes; no more than 80% of outdoor birds within first 1/3 of outdoor space closest to the house
Plumage	Sample of 100 birds per house; max 10% may score 2
Behaviors	Auditor records natural behaviors — min 3 distinct behaviors total
Records	All documentation reviewed on-site

STEP 4 UNDERSTAND THE PERMITTED ENRICHMENT CATEGORIES

You need at least 1 enrichment type from the following 5 categories, placed beyond the first third of the outdoor space:

CATEGORY	EXAMPLES	
Dustbathing areas	Designated dry sand or fine-particle soil areas, preferably covered from rain	***Required***
Shade/cover	Well-managed wooded areas, shade structures or predator cover	
Perches/elevated structures	Straw bale stacks that create multiple height levels for perching and jumping or wooden pallets stacked and stabilized	
Novel objects/sensory enrichment	Regularly rotated novel objects, hanging manipulable items or reflective/colored objects providing visual stimulation	
Foraging	Loose woodchip areas that can be scratched through and may harbor invertebrates	

Important: Enrichment must be in good condition at the time of the audit. Waterlogged, fully consumed or inaccessible enrichment does not count.

STEP 5 TIPS FOR MAINTAINING COMPLIANCE YEAR-ROUND

- Check and log outdoor area conditions twice daily — make this part of your morning and evening routine
- Rotate range sections proactively, before ground becomes poached or bare
- Re-seed or overseed in autumn so vegetation has a head start in spring
- Inspect pop-holes weekly — clear any obstructions, check aprons are dry
- Refresh enrichment regularly; rotate novel objects monthly at minimum
- Review your indoor confinement tally monthly — if it is approaching 60 days, plan ahead
- Keep all flock health, mortality and outdoor inspection records current and accessible

COMMON PITFALLS TO AVOID

PITFALL	HOW TO AVOID IT
Bare ground near pop-holes	High traffic near exits quickly destroys vegetation. Install a hard apron immediately outside each pop-hole and manage a buffer zone with woodchip or similar.
Enrichment too close to the house	Enrichment in the first third of the range (nearest the house) does not count. Place items progressively farther out.
Shade only from the house structure	Shade cast by the house wall does not satisfy the shade requirement. Independent shade structures or trees at distance are required.
No outdoor water source	Many producers assume indoor water is sufficient. A functioning water point in the range is required.
Missing SOP or out-of-date records	The Exterior Access SOP is a mandatory document. Auditors will check it. Having it ready before your first audit is essential.
Underestimating confinement days	Start logging every weather confinement day from day one. 90 days passes faster than expected in poor-weather regions.

Please note: this is a supporting document. If you have specific questions, please feel free to reach out to your American Humane Society Farm Operations Manager at any time.

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