

ATTACHMENT C

Backyard Chickens Key Messages – Chatham-Kent March 2023

We understand why consumers want to raise chickens that produce their own eggs. There is nothing better than eating a fresh egg that you helped to produce. However, taking care of chickens requires a great deal of expertise. Chickens are not pets and need a different kind of care than dogs, cats and other family pets might get from your local veterinarian.

Raising livestock in any setting is a big responsibility which can be further complicated in an urban or suburban area. Raising hens requires nutritionally balanced feed, clean water, protection from predators and adequate housing to protect them against inclement weather. It requires adaptations to the typical back yard, a daily time commitment to caring for the hens 365 days a year, a lot of preparation and a great deal of expertise.

Careful consideration needs to be given to any plans put in place to ensure food safety regulations are followed and disease transmission risks are mitigated, to protect all Chatham-Kent residents. Hen welfare also needs to be top priority to ensure hens have a safe, temperature-controlled environment, with access to proper feed and fresh water.

All farmers, regardless of flock size, need to ensure proper biosecurity protocols are put in place to protect their hens. These protocols are important and should be followed 365 days a year. Currently in Ontario, ALL poultry farmers, regardless of size, are to be following enhanced biosecurity protocols to prevent further spread of the devastating avian influenza virus (which has already caused over 2 million birds across Canada to be euthanized). As a matter of fact, the first case of 2023 was in a backyard flock just outside of Blenheim.

All commercial eggs are graded to ensure the highest quality is offered to Ontario consumers. However, eggs from backyard flocks are not graded and it is difficult to guarantee that the egg is in fact fresh, free from contamination and safe to eat.

From a human health standpoint, protocols for handling soiled or cracked eggs or contaminated carcasses must be in place to ensure human health. In addition, to be environmentally sustainable, all farmers, regardless of size, must also have plans in place for removal and disposal of waste products, including manure and carcasses.

The Canadian Association of Poultry Veterinarians also encourages municipalities who support urban poultry production to develop a licensing and auditing system that ensures urban farmers are identifiable, have the knowledge and facilities to provide for the necessities of their poultry, have an arrangement for health care for the birds, and are responsibly disposing of all waste products.

The *Top Ten List of Chores* factsheet (attached) was developed by two poultry veterinarians, who stress several important steps to ensure the hen's health, safety and well-being.

Key Areas to Address to Ensure Health and Safety of the Hens and Residents

Bird Welfare

- Sources need to be in place to provide access to appropriate feed for laying hens.
- Educational information needs to be available for inexperienced residents to be able to provide suitable housing and nutrition for the hens they wish to care for.
- Enclosures need to be audited to ensure they provide for the hens' physical needs, including heat for winter, shade for hot summer days, effective feeding and watering systems that inhibit contaminants.
- Enclosures need to be audited to ensure they adequately contain the hens and provide protection from predators.
- Protocols for developing relationships with veterinarians who are willing and able to care for sick or injured laying hens need to be in place.

Public Health

- Protocols need to be established to ensure eggs are handled safely, from collection to storage to distribution.
- Regulations are necessary to control the distribution of excess egg, and a traceback mechanism should be in place in case of bacterial contamination or other food safety concerns.
- Urban farmers need to know how to handle soiled or cracked eggs so that bacterial contamination is minimized.
- Safe standards are necessary so that infection of the urban farmer or their family does not occur due to the waste products produced by the hens.
- Programs and information delineating safe slaughter procedures must be available to urban farmers planning on using the hens for meat.

Environment and Public Nuisance

- Plans need to be in place for disposal of poultry waste, including manure, broken eggs and carcasses.
- Protocols must be implemented that will resolve neighbour disputes over noise and odour.
- Regulations that minimize the attraction of vermin by the availability of either hens or chicken feed as feed sources are necessary.
- Programs that ensure that areas of poultry production are rotated so that the ground does not become overly contaminated with pathogens need to be in place.

International Considerations

- Programs that allow urban farmers to be identified and located will be necessary in order to guard against viral diseases that may have international trade consequences for ALL poultry farmers in the province. As experienced during the 2022 avian influenza situation across Ontario, backyard/small flocks have made up 66% of the positive cases. It is critically important that urban farmers be registered so that during a disease response, they can be contacted to mitigate risks of continued transmission.

Small flocks have risks

What prospective small flock egg farmers need to worry about protecting hen and human health

Raising livestock in Ontario typically requires agricultural property zoning but some municipalities are pilot-testing the raising of egg-laying hens in any residential environments.

Proper care of chickens requires some physical adaptations to a typical backyard, a daily time commitment to caring for the hens 365 days-a-year, a lot of preparation, and a great deal of expertise.

Local health units should always be consulted. Most have serious disease-related concerns about hens in residential areas. These are heightened by animal-human disease transmission related to many of the serious human outbreaks in history.

Most humane societies also have increased animal welfare concerns about backyard flocks and should be consulted.

If you are considering having a backyard flock of your own, here is an example of a Top 10-style chore list you could use as a starting point.

Did you know?

- A hen excretes about 1 kilogram of manure every week. It adds up!
- A hen can appear healthy, but can be laying eggs to the detriment of their own health if not receiving proper diet and care.
- Laying hens need feed that is especially high in protein and calcium. The high calcium level that a hen needs in her diet would be toxic to other animals such as a cat or dog.

Dr. Mike's Top 10 Hen Chores

The challenges of keeping hens healthy and alive in urban settings

- 1 Chicken feed must be purchased from a specialized supplier. Pet food stores are not known to carry the feed hens need.
- 2 To be comfortable, hens need shade for hot days, and a heat source for cold days.
- 3 Be sure to lock up the chickens at night to keep them safe from skunks, rats, raccoons and neighbourhood pets who will try to eat the hens and their feed.
- 4 Failing to provide clean water every day can lead to hen infections and illness.
- 5 Eggs are porous and can absorb invisible harmful bacteria if not handled properly.
- 6 Educate yourself on the different warning signs that indicate a hen is ill. Hens require vaccinations and health care from a qualified veterinarian.
- 7 It is not appropriate to compost chicken manure due to the high level of minerals (especially phosphorus) in the manure, which can stop the composting process in typical backyard composters. Develop a plan for how to dispose of your chicken manure.
- 8 All livestock including chickens can be carriers of diseases which can be transmitted to humans who are in close contact with them including children. It is important to learn how to handle and care for hens without accidentally exposing yourself to an animal disease such as Avian Influenza.
- 9 Hens can live to be 7-10 years old. An older hen needs to take a break from egg production periodically. Going out of production is termed molting, and occurs naturally, and is necessary for old hens to remain healthy.
- 10 Any area where animals live will become increasingly contaminated the longer animals are housed there. Plan to have "down time" when no poultry live in the yard, which will give you a chance to decontaminate the area, and break the life cycle of the bacteria and viruses.

Being an Urban Egg Farmer can be a rewarding experience and a great source of pride. However, failing to do these daily chores can severely affect hen health, hen welfare, egg quality, and consequently, human health.

Dr. Mike Petrik, DVM, Poultry Veterinarian

This list of Top Ten Hen Chores was prepared by Dr. Mike Petrik, DVM, on behalf of Egg Farmers of Ontario.