



Animal Care Program

FREE RANGE STANDARDS

FARMER MANUAL



**EGG FARMERS
OF CANADA**

ANIMAL CARE PROGRAM – FREE RANGE STANDARDS

Farmer Manual

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INTRODUCTION

Egg Farmers of Canada (EFC) has a comprehensive Animal Care Program (ACP) designed to demonstrate the level of care given to laying hens on Canadian egg farms and provide assurance that farmers are meeting appropriate animal care standards. The Free Range Standards Program was designed to fill in knowledge gaps for free range systems and acknowledge egg farmers' efforts in meeting the requirements for free range systems.

The objective of this program is to provide a consistent set of standards that egg farms across Canada must meet to be considered free range. Free Range Certification is mandatory for farms that wish to market their eggs as free range and is complementary to EFC's ACP.

The Free Range Standards Program was implemented on January 1, 2026. Regulated egg farms seeking Free Range Certification must comply with all applicable ACP requirements and successfully complete a Free Range Standards audit. Egg farmers with organic certification are exempt from certain Free Range Standards requirements, as outlined in this manual. Free range farms, as well as certified organic egg farms, will receive a Free Range Certificate following a successful Free Range Standards audit and completion of any corrective action requests (CARs).

Farms with a range that do not meet the Free Range Standards will be classified as free run and will not be issued a Free Range Certificate. These farms will not fail the ACP or have their EQA® certification impacted as long as all other ACP requirements are met. As with EQA®, EFC may notify egg boards, graders and processors of a change in certification status.

Existing farms that do not meet the Free Range Standards solely due to insufficient range space will still be issued a Free Range Certificate for 3 years following the implementation date, until January 1, 2029. After this date, compliance with the range space requirement will be mandatory.

The ACP Free Range Standards manual provides egg farmers with all the program requirements, recommended practices and sample record templates for a successful audit. Requirements are mandatory, while recommended practices are suggestions. Some requirements include keys to compliance that are outlined to ensure farmers have all the information they need to successfully implement the requirements. Records needed for certain requirements are also highlighted. The record templates included in Appendix A contain the minimum information that must be recorded to meet certain requirements. Farmers may create and use their own records, provided all the required information is included.

On-Farm Audit and Certification Process

The Free Range Standards Program is implemented at both the national and provincial / territorial levels. The Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) agreed to by the provincial / territorial egg boards and EFC set the requirements of EFC and the egg boards for the on-farm delivery and implementation of the on-farm programs, including the ACP and the Free Range Standards Program.

Roles and responsibilities

Egg Farmers of Canada responsibilities:

- ▶ Design, development and delivery of the Free Range Standards Program and its related documents
- ▶ Implementation of certification procedures and issuance of certification
- ▶ Development and delivery of training material and programs for the auditors
- ▶ Ongoing monitoring of the implementation of the Free Range Standards Program to ensure effectiveness and consistency in application across all regions
- ▶ Management of the complaints / appeals / disputes process

Egg board responsibilities:

- ▶ Prepare farmers for Free Range Standards Program audits where necessary
- ▶ Assist farmers with completing or preparing to complete corrective action requests, where applicable
- ▶ Liaise between EFC and farmers regarding complaints / appeals / disputes

Farmer responsibilities:

- ▶ Implement and maintain compliance with the Free Range Standards Program
- ▶ Keep records to demonstrate conformance to the Free Range Standards Program
- ▶ Continue to implement the program and undergo scheduled audits
- ▶ Take corrective action as necessary to resolve any non-conformances identified in an audit to maintain Free Range Certification

Audit procedure

Conformance to the Free Range Standards Program is determined by an annual audit process.

Audits are conducted by EFC Field Inspectors or independent third-party auditors. Inspectors perform audits on two thirds of registered egg farms annually, while third-party auditors perform the remaining third of audits across the country. All auditors / inspectors are Professional Animal Auditor Certification Organization (PAACO)-certified. Under normal circumstances, audits are scheduled in advance with the farmer by the auditor / inspector. The audit date is based on the availability of both parties.

The Free Range Standards audit consists of an on-farm visit and full audit conducted by the auditor / inspector to verify compliance by the farm to all applicable requirements in the ACP. An opening meeting is conducted at the start of the audit where the auditor / inspector will confirm the audit scope, procedure etc. During the audit, compliance to the Free Range Standards Program is assessed through reviewing the required documentation and records, discussing implementation with the farmer and touring the farm premises, lay facility, production unit and other buildings / areas as required. Non-conformances to ACP requirements that are observed will result in CARs being issued. At the end of the audit, a closing meeting is held to review the audit results and establish CAR timelines if applicable. An audit report is generated with this information and provided to the farmer as well as the egg board. Before CARs can be closed by the auditor / inspector, they must verify the implementation and effectiveness of the corrective action taken to become compliant with the ACP requirement(s) in question.

To pass the Free Range Standards audit, a farm must comply with all Free Range Standards Program requirements. This means all CARs issued for non-conformances observed during the audit must be closed in accordance with the issued timeframe. For the first year of implementation, Free Range Standards requirements are categorized as major non-conformances, and CARs issued will have a maximum completion timeframe of 1 year from the audit date. Following the initial implementation year, requirements are categorized as major non-conformances, and CARs issued will have a maximum completion timeframe of 3 months.

Auditors / inspectors retain flexibility to assign longer closure timeframes based on farm-specific situations. Corrective Action Plans (CAPs) can be developed for non-conformances that cannot be closed until the next flock cycle to close a CAR. If CARs are not closed within the issued timeframe, the Free Range Standards audit is failed and the alternative markets process is implemented.

Egg farmers with organic certification are exempt from program requirements 1, 2, 4, 5 and 8. However, they are not exempt from measuring questions related to bird capacity or egg labelling, which are included in requirements 3, 6 and 7.

Biosecurity during an audit

All auditors / inspectors follow EFC's biosecurity protocol when visiting farms. The protocol consists of a set of preventive measures undertaken to prevent contamination and reduce the biosecurity risk of visiting a farm. These measures include sequencing farm visits appropriately, vehicle cleaning, parking in a designated area, wearing clean coveralls and boots, disposing of clothing and boots in an acceptable location, disinfecting equipment and following any additional biosecurity measures requested by the farmer.

Audit schedule

Free Range Certification audits are conducted annually, within 9-15 months of the previous audit, along with the annual ACP audit.

Triggered audits may be initiated outside of the scheduled audits by events or issues that may have an impact on the welfare of the hens. These include but are not limited to:

- ▶ On-farm animal welfare incident or complaint reported by the public, media, farmer, farm employee or visitor, egg board, grader, processor or other stakeholder
- ▶ Animal welfare and / or cruelty investigation (Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals or other)
- ▶ Change in farm management or ownership
- ▶ New construction

Certification

Certification is granted when a farm meets the requirements of the Free Range Standards Program and has no outstanding CARs. EFC issues a certificate for a one-year period from the date of the initial assessment or re-assessment.

Certification may be suspended and / or withdrawn if an interim audit determines non-conformances and the farmer fails to meet the ACP or Free Range Standards Program and / or meet the timelines of a CAR.

Confidentiality and privacy policy

Through the Free Range Standards Program, EFC collects information related to individual farmers. EFC may collect this information through on-farm inspections, on-farm audits, and through CARs. Except as required by law, EFC will treat this information as confidential and will use this information for the sole purpose of administering the Free Range Standards Program. To this end, EFC may share this information with the egg board in the province or territory where the farmer is located, EFC Field Inspectors and third-party auditors for the sole purpose of administering the Free Range Standards Program.

Sample Audit Checklist

Manual reference	Page number	Requirement	Acceptable	Unacceptable	N/A
1. Range access	7	Flock is provided with access to the range for one third of their laying life. Range access must be granted to birds for at least 6 hours per day. Record: Range Access Record	☐	☐	☐
2. Range vegetation coverage	8	At 120 days of outdoor access, at least 50% of the range is covered with vegetation (or forage). Record: Range Access Record or photos	☐	☐	☐
3. Door openings	8	There must be a minimum total pophole opening width of 111.8 cm (44 in / 1.12 m) for each 1,000 birds.	☐	☐	☐
	8	Door openings are a minimum of 35 cm (13.8 in) high and 40 cm (15.7 in) wide and distributed throughout the lay facility.	☐	☐	☐
	9	(Recommended) Door openings are at least 50 cm (19.7 in) wide.	☐	☐	☐
4. Distance between ground level and popholes	9	For second-storey barns, records must show that birds access the range. Record: Range Access Record	☐	☐	☐
	9	All lay facilities: Popholes are at bird level.	☐	☐	☐
	9	Lay facilities installed or re-tooled <u>after January 1, 2026</u> : popholes are at bird level and at least 10.2 cm (4 in) above the ground.	☐	☐	☐
5. Perimeter fence	9	Perimeter fencing is permanent year-round and solidly constructed.	☐	☐	☐
	9	The perimeter fence is a minimum 121.92 cm (48 in / 4 ft / 1.22 m) high and tight to the ground.	☐	☐	☐
6. Range space	10	Lay facilities installed <u>before January 1, 2026</u> : ranges with less than 1,393.5 cm² (216 sq in / 1.5 sq ft / 0.14 m²) of space per bird have until January 1, 2029 to meet the requirement. Records: 23-week count or Pullet Flock History Certificate	☐	☐	☐
	10	Lay facilities installed or re-tooled <u>after January 1, 2026</u> : there must be 1,393.5 cm² (216 sq in / 1.5 sq ft / 0.14 m²) of range space per bird. Records: 23-week count or Pullet Flock History Certificate	☐	☐	☐
7. Free range egg labelling	10	Free range eggs must be clearly labelled if stored in a shared cooler.	☐	☐	☐
8. Lighting	10	(Recommended) New and re-tooled pullet rearing facilities should be built to provide birds with natural lighting.	☐	☐	☐

PROGRAM REQUIREMENTS

Free range facilities have been measured in accordance with EFC’s measuring protocol for free run / free range housing systems. Information measured and any corresponding calculations (e.g., bird capacity) are recorded in the housing measurement certificate and form. These documents must be up to date (i.e. no changes have been made to the lay facility and its amenities since the certificate and / or form were issued) and should be kept on file / available. The number of birds housed at the 23-week count cannot exceed the bird capacity for the free range facility identified on the housing measurement certificate. Meeting the bird capacity outlined on the free range housing measurement certificates by the 23-week count will ensure that all applicable requirements relating to pophole widths and range space per bird are met, in addition to all relevant ACP requirements.

1. RANGE ACCESS

Requirements

- ▶ Flock is provided with access to the range for one third of their laying life.
- ▶ Range access must be granted to birds for at least 6 hours per day. The 6 hours do not have to be consecutive.
- ▶ Access to the range and any restriction to this access must be clearly documented.

Keys to compliance

- ▶ Outdoor access may be temporarily restricted as the birds are learning to lay in the nests. Restriction must end by 28 weeks of age, or by peak production, up to a maximum of 30 weeks of age.
- ▶ If access is restricted due to poor weather, outside temperature and weather conditions must be documented (e.g., outside temperature, weather event like thunderstorm, high winds or heavy rain).
- ▶ Outdoor access may be restricted for reseedling for up to 4 weeks per year with documentation.
- ▶ If access is restricted due to health challenges, the restriction must be based only on acute illness, injury, or recovery where outdoor access may worsen the condition. Documentation from a veterinarian is required.
- ▶ If access is restricted due to high biosecurity risk such as disease, proof of risk is required (e.g., from provincial / territorial egg board or a provincial / territorial egg board-authorized committee).

Records

- ▶ Range Access Record
- ▶ If applicable, documentation on outside temperature and weather conditions
- ▶ If applicable, documentation on reseeding activities
- ▶ If applicable, documentation from veterinarian regarding health challenges
- ▶ If applicable, proof of biosecurity risk

2. RANGE VEGETATION COVERAGE

Requirement

- ▶ At 120 days of outdoor access, at least 50% of the range is covered with vegetation (or forage).

✓ Keys to compliance

- ▶ The range must be at least 50% covered with vegetation at 120 days of access. This must be evident in person, or via dated photos or records.

Record

- ▶ Range Access Record and / or dated photos

3. DOOR OPENINGS

Requirements

- ▶ There must be a minimum total pophole opening width of 111.8 cm (44 in) for each 1,000 birds.
 - This requirement may be met using one or multiple pophole openings.
- ▶ Door openings are a minimum of 35 cm (13.8 in) high and 40 cm (15.7 in) wide and distributed throughout the lay facility.¹

✓ Keys to compliance

- ▶ If popholes are opened and closed to manage bird access to certain ranges, there must be enough open popholes available to meet the minimum total opening width requirement for the entire flock.

¹ This is a requirement in the Animal Care Program.

- ▶ If birds pass through more than one set of popholes to access the range, the total pophole width is determined based on the set of popholes with the least total opening width.

Recommended practice

- ▶ Door openings are at least 50 cm (19.7 in) wide.

4. DISTANCE BETWEEN GROUND LEVEL AND POPHOLES

Requirement

- ▶ **All lay facilities:** Popholes are at bird level.²

✓ Keys to compliance

- ▶ In barns with a second storey, birds must have access to both the barn and the outdoor range. Records must be maintained to demonstrate that flocks access the range.

- ▶ **Lay facilities installed or re-tooled after January 1, 2026:** Popholes are at bird level and at least 10.2 cm (4 in) above the ground.³

Record

- ▶ Range Access Record

5. PERIMETER FENCE

Requirements

- ▶ Perimeter fencing must be permanent year-round and solidly constructed.
- ▶ The perimeter fence must be a minimum of 121.92 cm (48 in / 4 ft / 1.22 m) high and tight to the ground.

² Bird level means the pophole is located at a height above the ground level of the lay facility that allows the birds to move directly from the ground through the pophole with ease, based on their natural movements (ability to jump, hop, etc.).

³ This is a requirement in the Animal Care Program.

6. RANGE SPACE

Requirement

- ▶ Each bird must be provided with a minimum of 1,393.5 cm² (216 sq in / 1.5 sq ft / 0.14 m²) of range space.

Record

- ▶ **23-Week count or Pullet Flock History Certificate**
- ▶ **Lay facilities installed before January 1, 2026:** Ranges with less than 1,393.5 cm² (216 sq in / 1.5 sq ft / 0.14 m²) of space per bird have until January 1, 2029 (3 years post the implementation date) to meet the requirement. After this date, a CAR will be issued and must be closed within the specified completion timeframe at the time of audit to maintain certification.
- ▶ **Lay facilities installed or re-tooled after January 1, 2026:** There must be 1,393.5 cm² (216 sq in / 1.5 sq ft / 0.14 m²) of range space per bird.

7. FREE RANGE EGG LABELLING

Requirement

- ▶ Free range eggs must be clearly labelled if stored in a shared cooler.

8. LIGHTING

Recommended practice

- ▶ New and re-tooled pullet rearing facilities should be built to provide birds with natural lighting.

APPENDIX A – RECORD TEMPLATES

List of record templates

- ▶ Range Access Record
- ▶ Pullet Flock History Certificate

Range Access Record (template)

Complete this record each day birds are eligible for outdoor access, beginning no later than 30 weeks of age. Any restriction to access must be documented, along with any required supporting records (e.g., documentation of outside temperature and weather conditions, reseeded activities, veterinary direction related to health challenges, or proof of high biosecurity risk).

[illegible]

Pullet Flock History Certificate

Pullet Grower: _____ No. of Pullets: _____

Rearing facility housing system: _____
(e.g. conventional cage, free run / free range-single-tier, free run / free range-aviary)

Egg Farmer: _____ Date of Delivery: _____

(To be completed by the pullet supplier)*

I, the undersigned pullet (laying hen) supplier, am participating in the Egg Farmers of Canada HACCP-based On-Farm Food Safety Program Start Clean-Stay Clean® (Pullets), with the cooperating egg producer. The pullets encompassed by this Certificate were grown in compliance with the provincial board *Salmonella* testing program.

We will not knowingly supply any pullets that are or have been contaminated with *Salmonella* Enteritidis (SE) bacteria or with pharmaceutical residues. To the best of our knowledge, these chicks / pullets have been grown in an environment free of SE and confirm that no Category 1 antibiotics were given.

This flock was tested for SE on the following dates: (Attach a letter or lab results from the provincial board attesting that the flock environment samples were tested at name Laboratory on date and found to be SE negative).

Date of Test: _____ **Results:** _____

Start Clean-Stay Clean® Status:

☐ Date of Last Audit _____

☐ Score _____

Flock History:

Source of day-old chicks (hatchery): _____ Hatch Date: _____

Please check yes or no to the following statement: Chicks for this flock were sourced from a hatchery certified on the Canadian Hatchery Federation Animal Welfare Program, or US equivalent program (records / letter of assurance to be provided upon request).

☐ Yes☐ No

Vaccination Record: Date: _____ Vaccine: _____
 Date: _____ Vaccine: _____
 Date: _____ Vaccine: _____
 Date: _____ Vaccine: _____
 Date: _____ Vaccine: _____
 Date: _____ Vaccine: _____

Beak treatment⁴ or trimming⁵:

Method used (e.g., infra-red or hot blade):

Date of treatment or trimming:

Age at treatment or trimming:

Location of process (hatchery or on-farm):

I confirm that the following statements are true (records or letter of assurance to be provided upon request):

▶ Beak treatment or trimming was done prior to 10 days of age by competent persons using industry approved methods (infra-red or hot blade) that minimize bird discomfort and equipment that is properly maintained.

▶ No more than one-third of the top beak, as measured from the tip to the entrance of the nostrils was removed during the process.

▶ If beak trimming happened, the producer or a competent designated representative was readily available throughout the beak trimming process.

▶ Beak trimming must not be performed on birds that are older than 10 days of age, unless deemed necessary for emergency welfare reasons after all other measures to control cannibalism have been exhausted. If beak trimming happened after 10 days of age at the pullet rearing facility, it was carried out with veterinary consultation and oversight.

☐ Yes

☐ No

If pullets were reared in a free run / free range system, please check yes or no to the following statement: This flock had access to perches.

☐ Yes

☐ No

I confirm that the Handling, Catching and Loading Guidelines for Pullets and Laying hens were followed by all personnel involved with the handling, catching and loading of pullets during their removal from the pullet rearing facility.

Signature: Pullet Supplier / Owner / Grower

Pullet Quota #

*This certificate should be delivered to the egg farmer at the time when the pullets are transferred to the lay facility.

⁴ *Beak treatment* refers to a non-invasive procedure that uses specialized equipment (e.g., infra-red) that results in blunting of beaks.

⁵ *Beak trimming* refers to the removal of a portion of the beak, usually with a specialized instrument that simultaneously cuts and cauterizes (e.g., hot blade).

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GLOSSARY

Animal Care Program: Egg Farmers of Canada’s national on-farm program for animal welfare. It sets standards of care for laying hens in regulated egg production in Canada.

Bird: A chicken used in egg production of any age, size, or weight.

Free range: A system where birds roam freely inside a barn and are allowed access to an outdoor pasture or range area.

Free run: A system where birds roam freely inside a barn but do not have access to the outdoors.

Hen: A female domestic fowl that has reached sexual maturity (i.e. begun to lay eggs).

Laying life: The productive time of a laying hen’s life from the moment a hen starts to lay eggs in a lay facility and continues until the hen is removed from production.

Range: The outdoor area to which birds may have access from indoor production systems.

Re-tooling: A major renovation or overhaul of existing housing systems and / or structures that is not part of normal or routine repair or maintenance. The addition of enrichments or furnishings that were not included when housing systems were installed is not considered to be re-tooling.

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