

The Five Freedoms on Organic Farms

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(originally published in BC Organic Grower, May 2008. Reproduced here with permission)

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Introduction

Organic farmers have a long history of using management systems that allow the animals they raise to perform natural behaviours. By prohibiting confinement housing systems such as battery cages and gestation stalls, organic farmers have also earned strong support from consumers who value animal welfare.

Having successfully codified this ethic into regional and now mandatory national standards, Canada's organic farmers are poised to proactively address other aspects of animal welfare.

Organic standards generally permit only those housing systems that provide ample freedom of movement for animals. The ability to exhibit natural behaviours is an important aspect of an animal's quality of life. However, an animal's well-being depends upon a number of factors, and the freedom to behave naturally is just one of them.

The Farm Animal Welfare Council (a British stakeholder group including producers, scientists, animal welfare organizations, and government reps) distilled these various factors into what they have dubbed the Five Freedoms, now an internationally recognized set of principles that outlines the needs we should provide to animals in our care.

1. Freedom from Hunger and Thirst - by access to fresh water and a suitable diet

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 or rapid diagnosis and treatment.

4. Freedom to Express Normal Behaviour - by providing sufficient space, proper housing, and company of the animal's own species

5. Freedom from Fear and Distress - by ensuring living conditions and handling which avoid suffering.

The Five Freedoms can act as a useful guide when designing standards, inspecting farms, or making decisions about management practices to use. By considering how they can be incorporated into organic farming systems, the organic industry both ensures that the animals raised experience a good life and that consumers with animal welfare interests continue to support organic products.

The Five Freedoms in Organic Standards

The Canadian Organic Standard (COS) and the COABC standards address the Five Freedoms in a number of ways, by requiring resources such as sufficient space, access to food and water, and adequate bedding. The standards also address freedom from pain by prohibiting unnecessary surgical procedures such as tail docking of dairy cattle.

In addition, the COS has gone further and recommends that surgical procedures be performed in a manner that minimizes stress and pain. The COS also clearly permits the use of anaesthetic drugs for surgical use, opening the door for producers to increase their use of pain relief.

However, the use of pain relief during routine procedures such as castration and dehorning is not a requirement. As you would expect, some producers use it, and others don't.

It would be naïve to expect that a farmer (or a pet owner, for that matter) can prevent their animals from experiencing any pain in their life. However, good protocols are available for certain regular management procedures, such as castration and dehorning, and in these cases, producers can plan to incorporate them to minimize the pain experienced.

While these practices may carry an additional cost and time commitment, the benefit in avoiding potential criticism from those outside the industry is well worth the effort.

Most producers who try using pain relief report that their eased conscience is more than enough reward, and very few choose to go back. For those who need a financial incentive as well, research has demonstrated that animals provided with pain relief during surgical procedures make significant weight gains above animals that receive no pain relief.

Providing an Assurance of Animal Welfare

Each component of BC's organic certification structure has an important role to play in providing an assurance to consumers that animals on BC's organic farms are being raised humanely.

Standards content, Verification Officer training, Certification Committee expertise, and producer commitment are all critically important in providing this assurance.

Measurable Standards

The organic sector sets its own bar for standards of animal care in organic production. However, if that bar is not clearly defined, compliance with the standards is difficult to objectively assess. Accordingly, standards should incorporate objective and measurable criteria wherever possible.

Existing standards already include some of these measures, such as space allowance. As we move forward, additional objective and measurable criteria can be incorporated. Examples include air quality measures (e.g. amount of ammonia in the air), mortality rates, disease incidence, and body condition scores.

With more objective and measurable standards in place, Verification Officers are able to focus on documenting what they observe on a farm, rather than having to make subjective assessments of whether or not conditions are "adequate." This helps alleviate the pressure Verification Officers feel when forced to make difficult judgements, and allows them to maintain a positive working relationship with producers.

Animal Welfare in the Canadian Organic Standards

While some aspects of the COABC's standards are higher than the new Canadian Organic Standard (COS), the national standards feature a number of more specific requirements for animal care (see table for more complete list). Examples from the COS worth mentioning include the following:

- tail docking of cattle is prohibited
- forced moulting of poultry is prohibited
- open-air runs shall be provided with protective facilities
- for poultry, buildings shall be emptied, cleaned and disinfected between flocks
- protection from weather conditions during transport is required

Verification Officers and Certification Committees must take these requirements into account when evaluating farms under this new standard.

Flexibility and Outcomes

In some areas of the standards, flexibility is desirable in order to accommodate the vast variations in production systems. This gives producers the freedom to use practices that suit their operation and management style in order to “establish and maintain animal living-conditions that accommodate the health and natural behaviour of all animals” (an example from the COS). After all, different practices work well for different companies in other sectors as well.

This is the case with many of the COS requirements, which are not overly prescriptive. The critical concept is that whatever practices used should result in a good animal welfare outcome.

For example, the COS states that “open-air runs shall be provided with protective facilities”. The farmer is given flexibility regarding how they provide protection, as long as the outcome of preventing harm to their animals from predators is ensured.

If the Verification Officer and Certification Committee deem that the outcome is inadequate (e.g. too many mortalities from predation), the producer will need to make management or facility adjustments in order to satisfy the standard.

Producers can also measure other outcomes on-farm to assess the effectiveness of their practices. Examples include:

- monitoring ammonia concentration to assess air quality and adequacy of ventilation
- scoring animals for body condition, lameness, or other aspects of physical health.

Developing a relationship with a veterinarian will also help to identify and minimize health risks on-farm.

Assuring On-Farm Practices

Verification Officers and Certification Committees generally develop an intimate knowledge of the standards through their work. Assessing a farm’s practices according to the less prescriptive standards often requires that difficult judgements be made. The inclusion of more specific requirements in the COS may make these judgements easier in the future.

As it is difficult for any one person to develop an expertise in every aspect of organic farming, the ability of a Certification Body to recruit Verification

Officers and Certification Committees with a broad knowledge base is important.

Certification Committees should not overlook securing advice from animal welfare experts external to their committee. Veterinarians and researchers from UBC's animal welfare program may be helpful. Certification Bodies may even want to consider recruiting vets or scientists for their Certification Committees.

Most importantly, producers must buy in to principles of animal welfare and take the Five Freedoms into account when making decisions of what to do (and what not to do) on their farms. While providing high standards of animal welfare can be time-consuming and challenging, it is a critical part of the organic philosophy.

The organic industry has already built a strong reputation for providing a good quality of life to their animals, and this consumer base will continue to grow as organic producers stay innovative in their animal care practices.

National Organic Standard (2006) ***Section Content**

6.6.2 The use of electrical stimulation or allopathic tranquilizers is prohibited.

6.6.3 The animals shall have suitable shelter against inclement weather conditions (e.g. wind, rain, excessive heat and cold) during transportation and before slaughter.

6.6.4 Efforts shall be made to transport animals directly from the farm to their final destination.

6.6.6 Animals too ill to be transported shall be suitably euthanized, without cruelty.

6.7.12 Injured, diseased or sick animals shall receive individual treatment designed to minimize pain and suffering, which may include euthanasia.

6.7.13 Forced moulting of poultry is prohibited.

6.8.1 The operator of an organic livestock operation shall establish and maintain animal living-conditions that accommodate the health and natural behaviour of all animals, including:
(e) production techniques that foster the long-term health of livestock, especially where animals are required to provide a high level of production or rate of growth.
(f) appropriate resting and bedding areas in accordance with the needs of the animal;
(g) livestock housing shall have non-slip floors. The floor shall not be entirely of slatted or grid construction. Buildings shall have areas for bedding and resting that are sufficiently large, solidly built, comfortable, clean and dry. They shall be covered with a thick layer of dry bedding that can absorb excrement. Where bedding material is typically consumed by the animal species, it shall conform to the feed requirements of this standard.

6.8.3 The operator of an organic poultry operation shall establish and maintain poultry living conditions that accommodate the health and natural behaviour of poultry. Open-air runs shall be provided with protective facilities.

6.8.6 The keeping of rabbits in cages is not permitted.

6.8.8 Buildings shall be emptied, cleaned, and disinfected and runs left empty b/flocks

6.8.9.1 The housing of calves in individual pens is not permitted without the approval of the certification body. When permitted,
(a) calves may be housed in individual pens until three months of age, providing that they have enough room to turn around, lie down, stretch out when lying down, get up, rest and groom themselves;
(b) individual calf pens shall be designed and located so that each calf can see, smell and hear other calves.

6.8.9.2 Calves shall be group-housed following weaning.

6.8.9.3 Calves over six months of age shall have access to the outdoors and pasture.

6.10 Pest Management — Pest management shall involve in descending order of preference:
(a) preventive methods;
(b) mechanical, physical and biological control methods;
(c) the use of pesticides included in CAN/CGSB-32.311.

*Subject to upcoming amendments. Space requirements have not been included as significant amendments are pending.