

Response from Country Hen in regards to the Cornucopia report.

Recently, a report was released by a private organization that is dedicated to the fight for economic justice for the family-scale farming community. In their pursuit to promote small family farming, they target the commercially sized operations that are able to provide the quantities of organic foods necessary to meet consumer demand and remain reasonably priced in the retail market.

The recent report included The Country Hen in its comparisons, and did not assign us a favorable rating. We ask that you take the opportunity to read our comments in response to this survey.

George Bass started The Country Hen in 1987 with a commitment to providing a safe, healthy and comfortably pampered environment for the hens, and a carefully researched and developed organic diet. With that in mind, he purchased this property, removed the cages and put in windows for natural lighting, sunbathing, and for fresh air, weather permitting. In doing so, he determined that the hens needed to have 1.5 square feet of floor space, per bird, in order to provide optimal comfort and room for stretching wings.

Our barns have nests, benches, and a large scratch area for the hens to roam about, socializing as they wish. This scratch area encompasses approximately 30-40% of the total space in the barn, allowing plenty of space for the hens to forage and scratch in deep litter and practice natural behaviors. The benches are topped with wooden slats, which serve two purposes. First, they keep the hens separate from the manure; and second, the slatted tops to the benches allow the hens to wrap their toes around the slats to perch. Our barns also have windows that run the entire length of both sides of the buildings, which flood the barns with natural light, allowing for plenty of sunbathing for the hens.

The hens have access to clean, fresh water 24 hours per day, and have constant access to a premium organic feed, milled right here at the farm to our exacting standards. We don't have aviary systems in our barns - all of our hens are on the floor and free to move about at will.

All of these factors add up to a comfortable and safe environment, which allows the hens to exhibit all of their standard characteristics of natural behavior - sunbathe, dust bathe, socialize in small groups, wing flapping, preening, and perching. They also have the ability to forage and walk around in the barn's scratch areas.

The only significant differences between the ideal stated by the "Scrambled Egg" report by Cornucopia and what The Country Hen offers are: # of hens in operation, and outdoor access. With regard to the size of the operation, we believe that it is not the size of the operation that matters - it is the way the hens are treated and the ability to produce quality, safe, organic product, in a manner that meets the new FDA Salmonella testing requirements.

Cornucopia's report not only implies, but actually comes right out and states that the small farm with hens out on the pasture with other animals are the way to go. This is not a surprise, as Cornucopia's mission statement begins with "Seeking economic justice for the family-scale farming community." In researching the different companies that received high ratings from Cornucopia, one will see ample evidence of this. Of all the companies rated either 4 or 5 eggs, 32 in all, it appears as though only 2 of them have more than 2,000 hens. Now, there are companies on the list that we were not able to

ascertain the size, and others that we made assumptions based on where there eggs are sold, but in general, these are extremely small farms - only large enough for direct to consumer sales, CSAs, farmer's markets, and the occasional local markets and/or restaurants. Farms of this size are not going to be able to supply the consumer demand for organic eggs.

The other discrepancy between Cornucopia's "ideal" and The Country Hen is our position on outdoor access. We firmly believe that the only safe outdoor access for our hens is via protected porches. We have been honest, open and upfront about this from the start. Our cartons state right on them that the birds have access to the outdoors through porches. Our website shows pictures of the porches, and we have conducted two consumer surveys regarding them. The first survey, conducted in 2002, was compiled as an insert in our egg cartons, and 100,000 copies were sent out. Click here to access the survey from our archives:

<http://www.countryhen.com/viewarticle.php?type=1&artid=1429630395c25a7.32291419>

The second survey involved emailing or mailing a letter to over 1,500 consumers. This survey was first released earlier this year, and over 96% of the respondents to date agree that the porch access for our hens is suitable. Click here to read our second survey:

<http://www.countryhen.com/viewarticle.php?type=2&artid=24cc5929504c677.66022349>

We continue to welcome feedback on this issue. Please read through the newest survey in detail, and email your input to sheila.taylor@countryhen.com.

To sum up our position on outdoor access for the hens, we offer our hens porches. These are wooden structures with translucent fiberglass roofing, that lets in plenty of natural, direct sunlight, and netting for walls, which allow for plenty of fresh air, but keeps the hens protected from disease and predators. We stand behind these porches for several reasons. First, out on the range, the hens are at risk of developing Avian Influenza and other diseases that can be passed to them via wild birds and migrating waterfowl. Second, the hens would be exposed to predators, such as coyotes, foxes, and raccoons, that could invade and devastate a flock of hens. Third, if not ranged properly, the ground they occupy will be stripped to bare soil, which increases the risk of them being exposed to worms and parasites.

These are the reasons that relate to the safety and well-being of the hens, which is our first priority in utilizing the porches. However, there are other reasons for them as well. We are on the watershed that feeds the Quabbin Reservoir, which in turn supplies water to Boston and 30 surrounding communities. Ground water contamination would be a real threat if the hens are not ranged properly. In order to properly range hens, one needs to provide enough space so that the land will not get devastated by hens pecking and scratching. This would be achieved by providing a minimum of one acre for every 100 hens. We would need over 800 acres to properly range our hens. Our farm sits on approximately 17 acres, and is surrounded by neighbors with no possibility for expansion.

This is just a summary of our surveys. Again, we encourage you to read the two surveys for our detailed positions.

In an effort to supply our hens with outdoor access and keep them safe and protected at the same time, we developed this system of porches. We have cutouts along the building through which all the hens can access the porches. We would also like to mention that Cornucopia's position is that small outdoor runs, while not their ideal, are acceptable as outdoor access simply because the hens are on the ground

and not on porches. To our way of thinking, this type of outdoor access is much worse than our porches - the ground becomes a barren dirt surface, and the hens end up foraging on bare dirt, a true breeding ground for disease and a vector for Salmonella. How can this possibly be a better, and safer, environment for the hens?

Finally, we would like to take this opportunity to point out some incorrect information that Cornucopia has stated about our company. First off, Cornucopia repeatedly refers to our porches as small concrete porches. Our porches are wooden structures, with a translucent fiberglass roof, and netting surrounding the sides of the porches. Deep litter is accumulated over a short period of time for scratching and foraging to practice natural behaviors in a safe environment.

Secondly, the report states that we were denied certification by two certifiers in 2002, when the organic rule went into effect. This is incorrect. While certified organic by an approved certifying agent, we made the decision to proceed with certification with a local agency, then known as NOFA/Mass. Since then, NOFA/Mass has been MICI, and now, Bay State Organics. We had not been denied certification by any other certifier, so there was no failure to disclose this information. We were denied certification by NOFA/Mass because they did not consider our porches acceptable outdoor access. As we explained earlier, we do feel that they are, and filed an appeal with NOP. NOP sustained the appeal, and required NOFA/Mass to certify us as organic, but NOFA/Mass refused. It became obvious that we were not going to be able to have a working relationship with them when they refused to accept the decision of the National Organic Program. As such, we decided we needed to move on to a different certifying agency.

In summary, the only certifier who has denied us certification has been NOFA/Mass and they were wrong to do so, according to the NOP.

Cornucopia also states that our henhouses house tens of thousands of hens. In fact, our largest flock is a flock of 8,800 hens. All of our other flocks are 7,100 hens or smaller housed in 11 separate flocks of different ages.

In conclusion, we believe that the only way to insure that everyone, from producer to consumer, and all points in between, has a clear and concise understanding of exactly the way their food is being produced is for all producers to be completely transparent about their methods. While there is nothing wrong with the utopian ideal that Cornucopia holds, it is just not possible for farms of that size to produce enough organic eggs to meet consumer demand. Should consumers be deprived the opportunity to enjoy organic eggs safe from pesticides and insecticides, and produced by happy, healthy, and comfortable hens? We believe that firm guidelines need to be established, and once established, they need to be adhered to by producers, and enforced by certifiers.

In the interim, we recommend that the consumers do some checking around. Call the producers directly and ask them questions - learn where your food is coming from. We welcome these questions, and always enjoy the opportunity to help educate the consumers. We are proud of the way we run our farm, the safe and comfortable environment we provide the hens, and the outstanding quality product that we produce.

Thank you for taking the time to read this. And again, we welcome your feedback on this. Please visit the links above to read our two surveys, and respond via email to sheila.taylor@countryhen.com.