



Poultry Management

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Biosecurity for Backyard Flocks

Backyard flocks are raised for a variety of reasons - for show game or exhibition birds, for meat and/or eggs, or simply as a hobby for adults or children. Whatever the reason, raising a backyard flock involves an investment of time and money. For that reason and to protect against the spread of disease, it is imperative that owners of backyard flocks be as diligent as producers and owners of commercial flocks with respect to biosecurity.

Biosecurity involves the total management of a flock or herd of livestock in a manner that promotes their well-being and prevents the establishment and the spread of diseases.

Starting with good-quality stock is an important first step. Whether stock is bought as day-old chicks, as grown birds, or as eggs, they should be purchased from companies or hatcheries that are part of the National Poultry Improvement Program (NPIP). The NPIP ensures that birds are free of certain diseases. In order to maintain an effective health program, consulting with a local veterinarian or Extension office regularly is a good idea. If birds rather than eggs are bought for the flock, it is wise never to mix different species of birds. One species may carry and be immune to a disease that is infectious for another. Never mix turkeys and chickens or raise turkeys in the same enclosure used to raise a flock of chickens. Pullets started elsewhere, mature pullets, or force-molted hens introduced into a laying flock may carry diseases to the resident flock. For the same reason different age birds should never be mixed together. Older birds may carry diseases to which younger birds have not yet developed an immunity.

The flock should be well housed and have access to good-quality feed and water. If the house has been used for other birds previously, make sure to have it cleaned out and disinfected. Remove the litter and add new litter, and make sure feeders and waterers are

cleaned and disinfected. Providing feed and water is not always enough. The feeders and waterers should be positioned such that all birds have equal access to them. This prevents the aggressive ones from preventing the weak ones from eating and starving to death. The flock should have access to enough light, enough space (not overcrowded), and have adequate ventilation, and it should not be subjected to stresses such as temperature extremes.

Good-quality litter is essential in maintaining flock health. Litter should be laid out to about 4-6 inches and should not be too dry. Waterers should be checked frequently to make sure birds do not spill too much water. Wet litter encourages the growth of pathogens and leads to development of breast blisters and foot pad dermatitis. Crust out the litter periodically to remove wet spots and manure, and top dress it with fresh litter.

In any normal flock, there is a level of acceptable mortality. Dead birds should be removed promptly so that they do not become a source of infection for the rest. Dispose of them by burying, incinerating or composting. Visibly sick and moribund birds should also be culled regularly. If a disease is suspected, either consult with a veterinarian or send a few birds to a state or diagnostic laboratory for autopsy and diagnosis. If it is possible, separate the sick birds from the healthy ones in order to limit the spread of the disease. Poultry are usually very cannibalistic and therefore it may be advisable to trim their beaks slightly at a very young age.

What are the sources of infection that can be introduced into a backyard flock? Man is one of the primary and most important sources because human beings are very mobile and track in infectious agents on their clothes, footwear, supplies, and equipment. Clean and disinfect equipment regularly and do not borrow equipment from neighbors. Use coveralls, if possible,

or have designated work clothes and footwear. Remember to change such clothes and footwear when going into public.

Rodents, pets, and wild birds can carry pathogens that are infectious for poultry. Do not allow them access to the birds. Usually, spilled feed will attract rodents and birds. Regularly collect such feed for disposal, and make sure feeders are such that birds do not spill too much feed, because feed is one of the most costly items in such an enterprise. In order not to attract wild birds and waterfowl, make sure that the birdhouse or enclosure is not accessible to them. Wild birds also carry pathogens that are infectious for domestic birds.

Birds that are shown at exhibitions or fairs or excess birds traded at live bird markets should be quarantined for at least two weeks before being returned to the flock. This will allow for the development of signs or symptoms of potential diseases they may have picked up from other birds. Birds purchased from such places should also be quarantined. Do not accept birds from neighbors even if they are of the same type and approximate age.

Record keeping for a backyard flock may seem unnecessary, but it is a good idea to keep a record of purchases – eggs, chicks, feed, etc. Keep an account of how much feed is consumed each week. Also keep a record of daily and or weekly mortalities. Such records will help pinpoint when there is a change in the flock that may be due to the introduction of a disease agent. These may be an increase in mortality levels, a decrease in feed consumption, or a drop in egg production. Such records not only help the producer determine when a change occurred in the flock, but they may help a veterinarian determine the probable cause of such changes.

References

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