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Urban Backyard Flocks

When a municipality is asked to pass bylaws permitting urban residents to raise egg-laying hens in their own backyards, we think it's important to consider that laying hens require a great deal of care to ensure their safety and well-being. Alberta's registered egg farmers, who make up the Egg Farmers of Alberta's membership, are family farmers who have the knowledge, expertise and practical experience to ensure the hens are properly sheltered, receive nutritionally balanced feed and clean water, and are protected from predators. Our farmers receive continuous support from veterinarians, agricultural nutritionists and on-farm food safety experts, in order to deliver a safe and healthy product to Alberta's grocery stores.

Before deciding what is right for your community, consider the following:

- Bylaws banning the practice of raising farm animals in urban areas were originally adopted for reasons of health, food safety and hygiene;
- Laying hens not housed properly, can attract a variety of predators and vermin, including bugs, flies, mice, rats, coyotes, raccoons, skunks, foxes and even bears;
- Concerns among residents are common pertaining to noise, smells, fear of diseases, and reduced property values;
- Municipal staff will be required to handle complaints, deal with situations where hens are not being properly cared for and devise an emergency plan in case of a poultry disease outbreak;
- Residents raising backyard flocks will need to develop a system to regularly collect and dispose of chicken manure (can't be used to compost), and mortalities.

Here is some basic information about the challenges and responsibilities that come with raising hens in an urban environment:

- To ensure the health of the hens, coop floors must be regularly cleaned, disinfected and kept free of standing water;
- Chicken manure must be collected and disposed of regularly, otherwise a coop can attract a variety of predators and vermin including bugs and flies, mice, rats, coyotes, raccoons, skunks, foxes and even bears;
- Chicken manure is a reservoir for bacterial growth, including Salmonella. Salmonella is a leading cause of food poisoning.

- Residents raising backyard flocks will have to develop a system to collect and dispose of hen mortalities;
- Laying hens require continuous access to fresh drinking water, a nutritionally balanced food supply and proper shelter from extreme weather conditions;
- Adequate ventilation and air circulation in the coop is critical to creating a comfortable environment for the laying hens;
- Fencing around the outdoor area must be well maintained to ensure hens cannot escape or become trapped;
- Hens must always have access to insoluble grit to aid in digestion, especially if the eggs are intended for human consumption;
- To avoid contact with wild birds who are carriers of diseases such as avian influenza, laying hens should be kept inside their coops during the spring migratory period.
- Proper egg handling techniques are required to avoid potential food safety issues, which starts with washing your hands after working with your birds or handling their eggs.
- Chickens are farm animals, not pets. Caring for egg laying hens is significantly different than caring for a typical pet, such as cats and dogs, especially since they may carry diseases that can infect humans.

If you have any general questions about eggs, please contact David Webb, Egg Farmers of Alberta's Marketing & Communications Manager, by phone at 403-250-1197 (x126) or by email at david.webb@eggs.ab.ca

If you have any questions about the care of laying hens, or about specific animal care concerns, please contact the Ag-Info Centre at 310-FARM for access to specialists, information and services within Alberta Agriculture and Rural Development.