



The benefits and limits of on-farm hatching in outdoor or small-scale organic farms

The welfare issue addressed is the long transport of small batches of chicks of specific slow-growing strains and delay before feeding and drinking between hatching in the hatchery and on-farm chick start. On-farm hatching after the transport of the eggs at 18 days of incubation limits chick manipulation and perturbation, weight loss, and dehydration (especially during hot seasons) with the possibility for the chick to eat and drink whenever it is ready to do so.

On-farm hatching, already spreading in conventional indoor farms, was semi-experimentally tested on a small-scale organic farm in the East of France and completely on-field in a label-type farm in the South West of France on slow-growing broiler chickens. The benefits observed were a better chick quality and performance in the outdoor farm using gas radiants, but adjustments were required in small-scale organic farms where ambient temperature was more difficult to fine tune by using a heating pad and a ventilating heater in order to keep the eggshell temperature around 36-37°C during the hatching process in order to avoid overheating. Vaccination has to be done on-farm except if it is possible to obtain vaccinated eggs from the hatchery at 18 days of incubation. In order to avoid too much energy cost on farm, this method could be used during the warm season when temperatures are high with little day/night variation. Farmers found this practice more rewarding but more stressful and requiring more work and monitoring than receiving day-old chicks, and conditioned by the possibility to collaborate with a commercial hatchery to obtain eggs incubated 18 days, if possible vaccinated.



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