

Unannounced Inspections: Winter Outdoor Access

By Katie Webb, Dairy Certification Specialist

MOFGA believes that access to the outdoors—which provides livestock with exercise areas, fresh air, and direct sunlight—is a critical part of sound organic management.

The National Organic Standards require that livestock including beef, poultry, sheep, goats, pigs and dairy cattle over the age of 6 months have year-round access to the outdoors when conditions are appropriate.* Outdoor access is one measure of animal welfare that helps set certified organic farms apart in the public's eye. Enforcement of the organic standards is an important part of strengthening confidence in the organic label, helping to create a viable market for organic farms in Maine.

Over the winter of 2012-2013, MOFGA Certification Services conducted 30 unannounced inspections to verify that livestock have access to the outdoors in winter months, conditions permitting. Dairy, poultry, sheep, goat, beef, and swine operations were visited on warm sunny days throughout the winter and early spring.

MCS sent letters to roughly 20 of these operations that were observed to be in compliance with the organic standards by providing outdoor access. At these operations, animals

could get into the fresh air and sunshine, and have the opportunity to move about freely outside in yards that are well maintained with frequent removal of wastes. Where feed is provided outside, there is ample room so livestock aren't crowding and competing for food. These operations deserve appreciation from the organic community for their dedication to management practices that promotes animal welfare through being certified organic.

We issued notices of noncompliance to operations that were observed to be confining animals indoors or not permitting groups of animals to have access to the outdoors on a regular basis. These operations were visited and/or observed from roadways multiple times before a conclusion was reached by inspectors. Operations who received a Notice of Noncompliance for lack of outdoor access are required to submit a plan on how they are going to provide outdoor access as required by the organic standards, and to implement this plan to be in full compliance.

Additionally, our inspectors also noted operations where they were not able to determine if the organic livestock were provided with adequate access to the outdoors

to meet the standards, even after multiple visits and observations. An example of this was typically a farm where outdoor access areas exist and were plowed of snow, but the area was not obviously recently in use by livestock and no one was there to ask about the status of outdoor access.

MOFGA Certification Services will continue to monitor outdoor access on an ongoing basis through announced inspections, unannounced inspections, and planned observations of certified organic farms because outdoor access and proper living conditions are such an important component of animal welfare in the organic standards.

We would like the organic community in Maine—both producers and loyal customers of certified organic farms alike—to have confidence that organic livestock products (eggs, meat and milk) are produced with proper organic management including access to the outdoors. If you have any questions about organic livestock living conditions or enforcement of the organic standard pertaining to livestock, please contact Katie Webb at our office: kwebb@mofga.org, (office:) 568-4142, (fax:) 1-866-344-0991. *National Organic Standards §205.238 Livestock living conditions.

Ergot Warning

Livestock Specialists are warning farmers in the northeast to be on the lookout for ergot fruiting bodies and ergot poisoning this year. The unusually warm wet weather as grasses matured provided the perfect conditions for ergot infection. Frequent rains also meant that there was an increased likelihood that haying was delayed and that hay was baled "headed out" or with seed heads. Ergot is a type of fungus that infects grass seed heads (or grain kernels). It produces hard black masses or fruiting bodies that protrude from the seed heads. This fungus produces a toxin called ergotoxine, which when ingested, effects the nervous and circulatory systems of animals. Symptoms of poisoning can include lameness, loss of appetite and gastronomic distress. Humans can also get "ergotism" by eating contaminated grain. The best way to manage ergot is to remove infected feed and to keep animals off infected pastures. For more information about ergot contamination of livestock feeds and how to manage this problem if you have it, please contact Rick Kersbergen <richard.kerbergen@maine.edu>

