# Organic Poultry Pasture Operational Guidance in Maryland

March 2024

Organic poultry animal feeding operations (AFOs) must comply with the USDA organic standards established by 7 Code of Federal Regulations (CFR) Part 205 – National Organic Program. When weather, age (3+ weeks), predator security, health and safety permit, organic birds have access to outdoor areas [Poultry Pasture*(PP)]. Outdoor areas are fenced and provide fresh air, direct sunlight, shade, vegetative cover, and exercise opportunities that allow birds to engage in natural behaviors.

The PPs are designed to provide the minimum outdoor space requirements for chickens based on maximum stocking density. Outdoor stocking density requirements are referenced in 7 CFR Part 205. Poultry AFOs converted from established broiler operations can utilize vegetated areas between poultry houses and vegetated areas beyond the ends of houses to comply with USDA vegetative organic standards of 7 CFR Part 205. These areas are monitored and managed daily to limit potential nutrient and sediment run-off.

The following actions and documentation are required to mitigate risk and ensure comprehensive compliance & monitoring:

1. To ensure that the PP has the ability to assimilate nutrients deposited by poultry, the PP must be allowed to "rest" or lie fallow for at least 3 weeks between flocks to allow for vegetative nutrient uptake.

2. The PP must maintain a minimum cover of 75% vegetation predominantly in grass or grass legume mix and legumes during the entire period that poultry have access to the PP. Soil type(s) must be identified and considered for the selection of grass or grass legume mix and legumes for the successful establishment of the vegetation and capability to assimilate nutrients in the PP.

3. Except for a tall grass type selected and managed for the purpose of providing tall shade in designated areas at 10% or less tall grass area of total area in the PP, the maximum height of the vegetation shall be maintained not to exceed 10 inches during the period that poultry have access to the PP.

4. Vegetation in the PP must never become denuded to the extent that it cannot be sustained during its normal growing season.

5. The PP must have no ponding or standing water for more than 24 hours.

6. The permittee must maintain records during the operating period of the poultry pasture including:

    a. Record of all days when the PP is in use. The record of all days when the PP is in use can be recorded on a calendar or the same calendar already in use by the producer.

    b. Record of weekly inspections of soil conditions in the PP, including instances of ponding or standing water, runoff or saturated soil.

    c. Record of weekly inspections of the vegetative conditions in the PP.

    d. Record of weekly inspections for any visible pollutant accumulations in the PP (such as manure, poultry litter, or process wastewater), with special attention paid to any excessive concentration of pollutants or pollutants in areas that are not vegetated.

e. Record of mortality disposal from within the PP including date of mortality, number of deceased animals and method of disposal. The record of mortality disposal within the PP can be recorded on an animal mortality record sheet for the poultry houses.

f. Record of laboratory soil sample analysis results** for the PP to establish a nutrient baseline and monitor soil fertility values over time. Soil sampling and analysis protocols shall be consistent with Maryland's technical standards at COMAR 15.20.07 and 15.20.08 and, in following UMD guidance for soil sampling, sampling for each management unit (PP). The record of laboratory soil sample results can be contained in the Nutrient Management Plan (NMP).

7. The Comprehensive Nutrient Management Plan (CNMP) shall include a narrative that provides a description of the management and use of the PP designed to prevent the discharge of pollutants to waters of the State. The narrative may include but not be limited to the estimated schedule of poultry managed on the PP, the number of flocks managed on the PP in a calendar year, the type of vegetation and/or tree species established, and best management practices installed and implemented. A conservation plan map shall delineate the boundaries of the PP and be included in the CNMP.

8. The Nutrient Management Plan (NMP) shall include a worksheet to calculate the manure deposited on the PP on a yearly basis. The "Estimate of Manure Deposited on Poultry Pasture For Integrated Organic Poultry Operations" has been developed by the University of Maryland Extension and may be used to provide this calculation.

9. Organic matter or carbon amendments, synthetic or non-synthetic materials, or practices as referenced in 7 CFR Part 205 may be applied or used in the PP for the purposes of improving soil organic matter content, improving organic crop production, and maintaining vegetative growth and vigor to maximize nutrient assimilation from the manure deposited by poultry. Crop fertility recommendations for the PP must be generated and followed in accordance with a NMP as required in COMAR 15.20.07 and 15.20.08.

* Poultry Pasture defined by 19AF NPDES Permit No. MDG01 (page 9 of 35): "means an area of an organic poultry CAFO or MAFO where chickens are allowed access to areas outside a poultry house. The Poultry Pasture allows for raising poultry on pasture in addition to indoor confinement. The Poultry Pasture is not considered part of the production area as long as the pasture area is managed to sustain vegetation during the normal vegetative growing season."

** The laboratory soil sample results may include analysis of soil organic matter to evaluate PP management decisions for the improvement of soil aeration, root growth, nutrient holding capacity, infiltration, and biological activity.

References:

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