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Chicken Needs in Autumn

Most of NE Kansas has had the first killing frost of the season, tree leaves are changing colors and falling and recent rains have provided some temperatures that make it seem like fall has finally arrived. As I was closing up the large windows on my chicken house, it occurred to me that this is a time of year for transition for poultry flocks and people alike. Let's take a look at some of the considerations needed for our feathered friends in autumn.

The first basic need, at any time of year really, is shelter. Make sure birds have a place to get out of the elements, especially rain and snow. Chickens don't like the rain and will prefer to mostly remain under cover during rain events, especially with hard rains. Chickens will need elevated roosts so they don't have to sleep on wet ground. Cold temperatures are not as much of a problem as cold AND wet conditions. Feathers are good insulators and chickens can withstand temperatures well below freezing, if they can remain dry and out of the wind.

In the fall, chickens will begin to change their eating habits. Because the weather is cooler, feed consumption will increase as maintenance energy requirements increase. In order to stay warm, they need to burn more calories. If chickens have been allowed to forage during the spring and summer, they will find far less feed in that same area in fall. The grass, weed seeds and insects will be mostly gone and birds will need to turn to feeders with a complete balanced feed to meet nutritional requirements. It is important to limit supplementation with scratch grains or table scraps to no more than about 15% to 20% of their total daily consumption.

Don't forget about a reliable water sources as the weather cools from summer heat. Daily water consumption will likely go down in fall, but clean, fresh water supply is a must. Avoid allowing birds to drink from pooled water on the ground, because pathogens and parasites can be an issue. Intestinal round worms are a common problem in chickens drinking from pooled surface water. Regular cleaning and disinfecting of drinking water containers can have noticeable response in terms of bird health and production.

Worm-infested chickens will generally appear healthy but seem to always be hungry, continue to eat but remain thin and emaciated. Worms may be observed in droppings as well. Dewormers are available in several different forms, that are effective at controlling internal parasites. Going into times of more confinement in fall and winter is also a good time to look for and control external parasites if present as well. When using products to control parasites, strictly follow the label directions for safe use, especially as it relates to eggs and meat products.

The primary impact of season change from summer into fall is a reduction in egg production. As discussed in past articles, chickens are stimulated to lay eggs by day length. Moving from summer into fall, day length declines resulting in reduced egg production in most hens. Some hens may completely stop laying eggs. During this period many will molt, a process of losing and replacing old, worn-out feathers with new ones. To reduce the effects of shorter days on egg production, artificial lighting can program chickens to remain in production. A low watt light on a timer in the chicken house that keeps the day length at or above about 14 hours per day will keep hens laying well through fall and winter, especially if a successful molt has taken place.

If you can give attention to management of shelter, feed, water, parasites and artificial light, the poultry flock will remain healthy and productive throughout the fall and into winter months. This is not an exhaustive list, but some big points to consider as you try to keep the egg basket full through the fall.