A method to evaluate the services provided by poultry free-range systems

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Access to an outdoor area is essential for Label Rouge, a well-known French quality certification for poultry, organic or more generally free-range poultry systems labelling. Beyond these regulatory obligations, the grazing of wooded land close to the chicken stable must be considered as an integral part of the farming system. The free-range yard layout makes it possible to provide services and reach some of the breeder goals.

While animal welfare is often highlighted, the outdoor area can add value on various other aspects such as environmental (promote pollinators, mitigate climate change), responses to societal expectations (beauty of the landscape, quality of the product), economic benefits (sale of timber, diversification of products), breeder's well-being.

In France, European leading producer of free-range poultry, thanks to the close collaboration among the poultry sector's, stakeholders (breeders, technicians, advisers and researchers), a practical and simplified method have been created to evaluate the benefits provided by the outdoor area. This complete method was developed to be used by breeders and technicians on a regular basis. It is constituted of several already existing tools such as the EBENE app which allows a quick and hands-on way of evaluating animal welfare (size of the feeder, animal behaviour...), or the MERCI protocol focused on biomass production assessment (growth survey of trees and vegetation covers).

Others protocols were added to the method to complete the assessment panel: soil structure tests by hole-digging, analysis of the breeders' bookkeeping, or insect traps to follow biodiversity. The monitoring of these indicators makes it possible to measure and estimate how much each service is provided by the system, and to highlight ways of improvement.

For more information:

About the EBENE application and how to use it (French):

https://www.itavi.asso.fr/content/protocole-ebene-guide-pour-les-utilisateurs

About the MERCI protocol and how to use it (French):

https://nouvelle-aquitaine.chambres-agriculture.fr/fileadmin/user_upload/Nouvelle-Aquitaine/094_Inst-Nouvelle-Aquitaine/Documents/innovation/MERCI_Descriptif_m%C3%A9thode.pdf

Figure 1. Chicken under poplar in the silvopoultry free-range yard, France

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