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CHICKENS FORAGING IN THE WOODS

Organic chickens should forage in the woods, should increase their intake of plants and insects from attractive outdoor areas and should be revitalised with new breeds that exhibit a more natural foraging behaviour. These are some of the initiatives that will contribute to a more diverse, reliable and robust organic broiler production and which will be investigated in a new project in order to increase market share of the organic production.

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Researchers will contribute to the growth of the organic broiler production through a re-evaluation of production systems. Photo: Janne Hansen

The organic broiler production needs a boost - both in terms of market share, animal welfare and its contribution to the organic market. In a new project, scientists from Aarhus University will examine, among other things, whether broiler production can be combined with the production of energy crops, woody crops or other crops that can also contribute to the chickens' intake of nutrients.

- It is unfortunate that the current organic broiler production has problems with animal welfare and is dependent on foreign and conventionally produced protein sources and hatching eggs. There is a need for systems that are more protective of the organic principles while also meeting consumer expectations for high animal welfare and low environmental and climate impact, says the leader of the project, senior researcher Sanna Steenfeldt from Aarhus University.

In the project the scientists will focus their attention on developing and testing new feeding strategies in existing systems and will also be introducing new breeds. This may increase the welfare of the animals and the share of organic ingredients in Danish broiler feed adapted to the different systems.

The scientists will also develop entirely new systems where new breeds will be integrated into the production of wood and energy crops in order to reduce nitrogen leaching, increase carbon storage, optimise the use of outdoor areas and improve animal welfare.

- If, across the different systems, a concept feed can be created based on a high proportion of Danish ingredients, and if the hatching eggs can be produced organically in Denmark and can supply the sector with multiple genotypes, then this will provide added value and make the entire chain more organic. It could also supply products that could create the basis for new brands, says Sanna Steenfeldt.

Slower growth and a free life

One of the important milestones of the project will be the combination of broiler production with forestry or with the production of other crop types. The chickens in the trial will be allowed to forage among willows and will have access to areas

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with chicory and herbs.

In another experimental setup, the organic broilers will have access to traditional grass-clover pastures or the forest edge of an established mixed forest. In both studies, the focus will be on environmental impacts, total biomass productivity and animal behaviour, welfare and nutrition.

The animals in the study will also include slow-growing broiler genotypes. These are hardier and better able to exploit the possibilities of supplementing their diet with the little delicacies they can find in the field or forest.

The four-year project has been granted 7.1 million Danish crowns from the Green Development and Demonstration Programme under the Ministry of Food, Agriculture and Fisheries. Besides Aarhus University, who are project leaders, project participants include the Knowledge Centre for Agriculture, the DLG Group, Top Æg ApS and two organic chicken producers.

The project, called MultiChick, is an Organic RDD2 project, funded by the Ministry of Food, Agriculture and Fisheries and coordinated by the International Centre for Research in Organic Food Systems (ICROFS).

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