

Wildfires and Backyard Poultry Safety

Wildfires can have significant impacts on poultry. The following is intended to address some concerns regarding potential effects of wildfires and backyard poultry.

1. Birds stop laying eggs

If your birds were laying eggs, it is very common for a traumatic event to make them stop laying eggs. This is perfectly normal. There is no specific time period for when they will return to lay. Especially during Fall and Winter, keep in mind that decreased day length may also cause many birds to molt (for typically 8-12 weeks), and they will naturally stop producing eggs until the amount of light in a day increases again.

2. Is it safe to consume their eggs?

The ash produced from fires can contain many harmful chemicals including heavy metals such as arsenic, cadmium, copper and lead. When humans are exposed to these types of compounds, exposure can result in potentially irreversible endocrine and neurologic impairment in both adults and children. There are previous studies which demonstrate that eggs from chickens exposed to similar toxic chemicals in their environment can contain detectable levels of heavy metals, PCBs and dioxins (Winkler 2015, Waegeneers 2009).

Out of an abundance of caution we recommend the following:

- Evaluate the area(s) where your poultry are housed for potential sources of harmful chemical contaminants such as household hazardous waste, building material, pesticides, and fire suppression chemicals. Do not allow chickens to forage near these sources. It is important to note that fire ash can contain many of these chemicals.
- Add clean soil, mulch, or other clean cover material to existing chicken runs to help reduce chickens' contact with and ingestion of contaminated soil. Use clean soil when constructing new chicken runs.
- Provide your chickens' regular feed in feeders and avoid scattering feed (including scratch grains and food scraps) on bare ground.
- Avoid feeding your chickens unwashed garden scraps from areas heavily affected with ash.
- If you are concerned about the safety of your eggs, consider having them tested at the CAHFS lab (info below) for lead and cadmium, two of the most abundant heavy metals found in backyard eggs in previous studies.

The following links may be helpful:

Home/Soil testing resources:

The California Environmental Laboratory Accreditation Program (ELAP) has certified soil testing labs. To find a list of California ELAP certified labs visit: bit.ly/ELAP-locations

The California Department of Public Health (CDPH) has more information on testing your home for lead at: bit.ly/CDPH-lead

Egg testing resource:

The California Animal Health and Food Safety (CAHFS) Laboratory can provide lead and cadmium testing for your eggs. More information can be found at www.cahfs.ucdavis.edu.

If you have any questions, please reach out to Dr. Maurice Pitesky at:
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