

Morpeth farmer wins ‘excellence in higher farm animal welfare’ for his chatty hens

In RSPCA Assured’s first-ever Pig and Poultry Awards

Tuesday 28 September 2021

Michael Rutherford, a farmer from Morpeth, Northumberland has today beaten off stiff competition from 28 nominees to win the ‘excellence in higher farm animal welfare’ category, in RSPCA Assured’s first-ever awards for pig and poultry members.

It’s a real family affair for Michael who, together with his wife, father and brother run an RSPCA Assured organic farm where they not only keep 12,000 laying hens - for which Michael has specifically received recognition - but also 1,900 breeding ewes, a small suckler herd and 2,000 pigs throughout the year.

He impressed an independent panel of judges with his unwavering commitment to laying hen welfare as one of the judges, Andrew Joret, chair of BEIC, the Lion Technical Committee and senior director of The International Egg Commission, explains:

“What really stood out was Michael’s dedication to finding ways to prevent the need to beak-trim his flocks. Beak trimming is a contentious issue that will eventually be phased out, so for Michael to be getting ahead of the curve by already successfully managing non-beak trimmed flocks is a real inspiration.



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“By exploring different types of enrichment and looking very closely at his birds’ environment, he has demonstrated that with the right focus, patience and dedication it can be done. He is very deserving of this award.”

Michael rotates at least a dozen different types of enrichment at any one time both inside and outside the shed. These include pecking blocks, grit placed on the floor, in feeders, or in plastic bottles hung from the ceiling. Hanging ropes with reflective discs, empty bottles and tennis balls are also firm favourites with his flocks.

Commenting on his win, Michael says:

“I’m delighted to win this award. It is great to be acknowledged by RSPCA Assured for all the work the family have put in, keeping our hens happy and healthy.

“As well as providing lots of interesting enrichment items, we invest in good quality litter, ventilation and lighting, all of which help keep the birds calm and relaxed. Right from the start, we also made a decision to produce medium eggs - rather than the more popular large ones - which also helps reduce stress.

“Whenever a new flock arrives, we spend a lot of time with them so they get used to us and we can move around and monitor the birds closely without startling them. And if my hens are chatting to me, which they really do, I know they’re happy and I’m getting something right!”

The RSPCA Assured awards are designed to recognise and reward pig, broiler, laying hen and turkey members for achievements in four categories:

- **Excellence in higher farm animal welfare** - going above and beyond the standards and/or expectations to help improve farm animal welfare
- **Excellence in the education of farm animal welfare** - being proactive in engaging and educating others about higher farm animal welfare
- **Excellence in sustainability and higher farm animal welfare** - demonstrating consistent dedication to caring for the environment and animals in general through sustainability efforts
- **Outstanding contribution** - to pig and poultry welfare

Originally planned to be announced at the *British Pig and Poultry Trade Fair 2020*, the final winners in the other categories are being announced daily this week via the scheme’s [website](#) and social media platforms [Facebook](#), [Twitter](#), [LinkedIn](#)

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RSPCA Assured hopes to extend its awards programme to the rest of its membership in the near future. For more information about the awards, Michael and the other winners and runners up click [here](#).

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