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August 22, 2012

Dear Mr. Underwood,

You asked me to offer some thoughts on small urban flocks of poultry, so here are some.

Let me start by telling you a little about my training and experience with poultry. I grew up on a small, diversified farm and we kept a backyard flock of poultry, including chickens, ducks, turkeys and guineas. I have a BS in Animal Science, an MS in Animal Breeding, working with chickens, and have worked with poultry here at the university for more than 19 years. I took numerous classes on poultry husbandry, diseases, and general animal science during my schooling, and have taught several classes here as well.

I will comment briefly on a few topics that often come up when discussing small flocks. I have been somewhat involved with several municipalities as they looked at legalizing these small flocks, so I'll assume you are proposing a similar ordinance (4-6 hens, no roosters, no slaughtering, etc.).

One of the first considerations is usually the risk of disease. While there are several diseases that can possibly be transmitted between chickens and humans, most of them are rare and are not usually a problem. As with any animal, some simple precautions (such as washing your hands after handling them and keeping clean facilities) can be taken to avoid most of these.

Following is a list of potential diseases and some comments about each of them:

Salmonellosis – This is often what people think of when they think of chickens. There are about 2500 different species of *Salmonella* and a few of them can be carried by chickens and can make people sick. The type that usually makes the news (*Salmonella enteritidis* or SE) can be contracted by consuming undercooked eggs or from contamination from raw chicken meat. It can rarely be contracted from contact with fecal material, but a good hand washing with soap after handling any chicken will take care of this. I'd also point out that salmonellosis can be contracted from pet turtles, iguanas, pygmy hedgehogs, etc. as well as dogs and cats.

Psittacosis – This is a bacterial disease that can be contracted from poultry, although it is very rare. It's more commonly carried by cage birds (parrots, etc.) than by poultry. It can be treated with antibiotics.

Tuberculosis – While rare, there have been records of people contracting tuberculosis from birds. Typically, those who are immunocompromised are most at risk. Tuberculosis is not a common disease in poultry.

Histoplasmosis – this is a fungal disease that is actually caused by a soil fungus. It's not carried by birds, but can grow in old poultry or pigeon manure. It's commonly connected with pigeon droppings in church belfries, barns, etc. where these droppings accumulate. As long as a poultry house is cleaned regularly, this should not be an issue at all.

Parasites – Because chickens are not closely related to humans (Class *Aves* vs. Class *Mammalia*), parasites are generally adapted to one or the other. Mites, lice, etc. from birds will not live on humans for more than a few hours. Likewise, internal parasites are typically adapted to the poultry gut and won't be a problem for humans. One protozoa, *Giardia*, can occasionally affect birds and humans. This is more commonly seen in cage birds (parakeets, canaries, etc.). Most hobby flock owners routinely monitor and treat their birds for parasites anyway, in an effort to improve the livelihood of the birds.

Influenza – This has been in the news quite a bit recently, and there has been evidence in some other countries that humans can become infected from chickens. The subtypes that affect humans have not occurred in poultry in the United States for many, many years. The USDA conducts an aggressive program to depopulate flocks that may have other subtypes in an effort to prevent this from happening in the future.

There are a few other viruses that have been transmitted to people in lab conditions, but which are not really concerns in a hobby flock situation.

Some other non-disease issues that are often brought up can also be easily controlled:

Flies – The best way to prevent flies is to keep the litter dry. The eggs and larvae (maggots) need moisture to develop, so if the litter is dry, they will not be an issue. Also, most small flock owners clean out regularly, so manure buildup is not an issue. With a flock size of a few chickens, excess moisture should not be a problem.

Odor – Similar to the issue of flies, odor is seldom a problem if the litter is kept dry. Odor is usually associated with ammonia production, and this will be prevented by keeping the litter dry. Again, with a flock size of a few chickens, I'd be surprised if there is a moisture problem.

Noise – Roosters crowing can be an annoyance, especially in the early morning! Hens are typically considerably quieter and shouldn't be an issue. Certainly, they should be no more disruptive than a barking dog.

After listing all of these things, I know it sounds horrible, but the risks are really quite minimal. With any animal, there are possible issues, but a list of possible threats from a dog or cat would be at least as long, and probably longer. I think a small flock of hens can make wonderful, if unique, pets in an urban backyard. They also offer some benefits, such as eggs, garden fertilizer, etc., that dogs or cats can't provide.

I have also followed the Madison chicken ordinance fairly closely. I believe it has been in effect for about 9 years, and I have heard of very few complaints over that time. Chickens are kept by a fairly small percentage of the households, but those owners seem to be very happy with their flocks. To my knowledge, their neighbors have not been bothered much either.

If you have any questions, please feel free to contact me.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Ron Kean". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Ron Kean
UW-Extension Poultry Specialist