

Opportunities in the Evolving Range/Pastured Poultry Industry

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INTRODUCTION

Quietly, but steadily, the number of pastured and range poultry producers is increasing in this country. The increase is happening quietly because many of the producers are raising and selling the poultry directly from their farms, and it is difficult to say how many such producers exist. One indication of the growing interest in pastured poultry production is the membership of the American Pastured Poultry Producers Association, founded in 1997, which already has a membership of nearly 500.

Two of the most important considerations farmers need to investigate prior to initiating a pastured or range poultry enterprise on their farms are 1) the type of production system they will use and 2) how they plan to process their birds. In the interest of time, only production of meat birds will be considered in this presentation.

Pastured and Range Poultry Production Systems

The Salatin Model¹. The production system most commonly in use today is the Pastured Poultry model developed by Joel Salatin of Polyface farms in Virginia. Salatin's model involves the use of floorless pens that are moved across the pasture daily. Salatin's pens are 10' x 12' by two feet high and generally house about 85-90 chickens. The frame of the pens is primarily made of treated one-inch lumber that is ripped into two- or three-inch widths. Two-by-two lumber is used in places requiring greater strength. The frame is covered with sheet aluminum and one-inch chicken wire. Many people have worked on variations of this design using UV treated PVC pipe, rebar, and other materials. The key to the pen, regardless of construction materials, is to make it light enough to move by hand, but heavy enough that the wind won't carry it off.

Salatin uses Cornish-White Rock cross chickens in his system, as do the proponents of nearly all other production models. This cross is the standard in the commercial industry, grows very quickly, and is a tremendous meat producer. On the down side, it is not a particularly hardy bird, nor is it a good foraging bird. Typically only about 10-20% of the bird's feed needs are

met from forage and insects. In all models, the birds will be better foragers if the pasture is kept short and succulent. The birds go into the pens at 2-3 weeks of age and are typically harvested at 8 weeks. Other breeds and strains are under consideration, but few have been used extensively.

Chickens in the Salatin model are somewhat protected from predators by the pen, and the concentration of chickens in the pen has the added benefit of concentrating their manure on the pasture. Some believe that the pen used in this model is too restrictive of the birds. They should have more room to roam. Salatin's response to this is that the Cornish cross chicken doesn't roam much to begin with and that the forage needs to be brought to the bird.

Herman Beck-Chenoweth Model². Herman Beck-Chenoweth's model of free-range poultry production utilizes an 8' x 16' skid house that is moved periodically with a tractor. The skid house houses the birds in the evening for predator protection, and the birds roam freely out from it during the day. Birds will typically range about 40 feet out from the house. Beck-Chenoweth recommends using 200-400 birds per house, harvesting some of the birds along the way to provide more space for other birds as they get larger. This model requires less labor, as the houses are only moved when the birds have denuded an area of 4-5 feet around the skid. This usually occurs every 3-4 weeks, but it will depend on weather conditions.

As the birds are allowed to roam freely, predation is a chief concern in this model. Beck-Chenoweth highly recommends a good perimeter fence, along with keeping the field perimeter closely mowed to discourage local dogs and other predators.

SEMI-INTENSIVE³. The semi-intensive model is a larger-scale production system common in Europe. A permanent house is used, and the birds are allowed access to pasture from the house. Often several paddocks are provided for an adequate rest and recovery period for the pastures and to reduce the risk of disease.

Several thousand birds can be raised in houses of this nature, assuming adequate pasture is provided. In addition, labor requirements can be significantly reduced. David Wilson, of Louisville, KY, tried out this system in the U.S. with several different contract growers and a special French meat breed of chickens developed for range production, known as LaBelle Rouge.

THE CHICKEN TRACTOR - ANDY LEE AND PATRICIA FOREMAN⁴. The chicken tractor model is not a specific model, but rather the concept of putting the chickens where they will do the most good and be the easiest to care for. Lee and Foreman draw heavily on the concepts of permaculture and the theory of "Relative Location," meaning that elements in a farming system should be placed in relationship with each other so that they assist and support each other.

As such, chicken tractors are often connected with gardens for their ability to provide fertility, insect control, soil scratching, and companionship for the gardener, but a "chicken tractor" can be much more. In this concept, any number of different models could be considered viable, including the Salatin model or the Beck-Chenoweth model, depending on how those models are planned into the total farming system. Lee and Foreman's farm in Virginia is a farm of many chicken "trial and error" experiments designed to learn how various systems work in relationship to the goals of the farmer.

POULTRY PROCESSING

Often, the biggest stumbling block to prospective range poultry producers is processing the chickens. The number of federally or state inspected independent poultry processing plants in the country has been declining for many years to the point that in some states (Kentucky, for example) there are currently no facilities available for independent poultry producers to have their chickens legally processed.

Following the lead of Joel Salatin, many producers have built small processing plants on their farms. The farmers develop a base of customers and direct market their chickens right off the farm. On-farm processing allows the producer to reap nearly all the financial benefits for the labor provided. Farmers in some states have developed mobile processing units so that several farmers can share the same equipment.

REGULATIONS FOR ON-FARM PROCESSING. The decision to process poultry directly on the farm must be carefully considered. There are both federal and state regulations that govern the processing of poultry on the farm, and farmers considering this option will need to learn about those regulations.

Through a recent SARE (Sustainable Agriculture Research and Education) grant, Heifer Project International (HPI) contracted with the National Center for Agricultural Law Research and Information (NCALRI) to develop a summary of the federal and state laws regarding on-farm processing of poultry for all 50 states, Puerto Rico, and the Virgin Islands. To date, summaries for only the 13 Southern states, Puerto Rico, and the Virgin Islands have been completed. The other states' summaries should be completed by mid to late 2000.

In most cases, a farmer can raise and process at least 1,000 birds annually as long as the birds are sold directly to end users. Anyone interested in a free copy of the legal summary can contact HPI or the ATTRA (Appropriate Technology Transfer for Rural Areas) program. HPI's phone number is 800-422-1311 (ask for someone in the USA/Canada program). ATTRA's phone number is 800-346-9140 (ask for Anne Fanatico). In addition to federal and state laws, state and local health departments should also be consulted.

INSPECTED PROCESSING FACILITIES. If on-farm processing isn't for you, then you should check into state or federally inspected processing facilities available in your state. You should be able to get this information from your state department of agriculture. If you already know of a plant that processes poultry, then you are one step ahead of most people. Before you raise any chickens, though, consult with the processor and your state department of agriculture to make sure that the chickens processed from that facility can be legally sold. Also figure out how your customers will get their chickens. Will they pick them up from the processing plant, or do you want them to come back to your farm to get them? Perhaps you want to deliver the birds to retail stores or restaurants. Transportation of the chickens after processing is another whole regulation issue that must be understood before you kill the first bird.

CONCLUSION

Pastured and range poultry production can be a very rewarding farm enterprise, both financially and emotionally. Customers truly appreciate the alternative product that you have made available to them. Anyone who is serious about starting a range poultry enterprise should visit some producers, learn which model best fits their farm, and determine which processing options are available in their region.

REFERENCES

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4. Fanatico, Anne. "Range Poultry Production Systems," APPPA Grit, Issue 9, p.1.
5. Lee, Andy and Foreman, Patricia. Chicken Tractor, Good Earth Publications.