

Pastured Broiler Production and Marketing

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Proceedings

These notes provide information, discussions, and questions and answers from the course that are additional to the printed materials provided to participants (enterprise manuals, presentations, and other resources).

DISCUSSION:

- **Pastured Poultry**

Pastured Poultry or Pasture-Raised Poultry is defined as poultry that spend a significant part of their lives eating grasses and bugs while living on or having access to fresh pasture.

- **The Business of Pastured Poultry**

It is important to have a short, catchy farm name with a contrasting color scheme. You can send a farm or product-related Christmas card to clients so they will remember their Christmas turkey. Farm pictures are a great idea for a web page: if the product looks good, it must taste good. People in cities can use free-range pastured poultry as a health statement as in "I only eat free range or pastured poultry. It is naturally raised and treated humanely." The organic poultry market is growing about 20 percent per year. There is a huge movement towards locally grown foods as farmers' markets have grown about 67 percent in the last decade. You can also sell to CSA, co-ops or direct from the farm.

You should accept credit or debit cards since most people pay their way. You might want to look into taking some of the government cards. Of course, accept cash and checks, and you may consider bartering. You might also be able to sell through a website. Check out the interest in free range and pastured poultry in your area before jumping in too big. Start with 50 chicks before going to 100.

Check rules of selling dressed poultry in your area and also check out the markets, such as farmers' markets, buying clubs, or local food co-ops. Friends, family, and word of mouth might be the best way, even if it is the slowest. Make effective use of your customer base and add to it in different ways. Keep the name and address of anyone who gives you a check, and ask to be included on lists of vegetable farmers, beef and pork farmers. Also refer them to your clients. Be

sure to keep in touch with your clients through mailings and by offering new customers incentives.

Poor ways to sell your product include: bulk, wholesale, u-pick, and newspaper ads. Most people read newspapers online and not the ads. If you decide to sell on the farm you might want to schedule other activities to hold at the same time. You could invite other farmers or maybe even some craft vendors. One marketing idea to set you apart from the other sellers is to dress the part. A straw hat and overalls or bonnets and long dresses or skirts can be used. You could use a mascot like Denise Anderson does with “Lil’ Bubbie.” This is what she calls her chicks and has a storyboard to go with them showing how they are cared for and raised. The story goes that Lil’ Bubbie lives on pasture in a modified free-range setting. Lil’ Bubbie is fed an all-natural diet and forage for grasses, bugs and worms. He has daily access to fresh air and sunshine.

There may be a problem with the cute little chick like there is with rabbits. People who purchase these animals sometimes make pets out of them, giving them names, and never have the courage to eat them.

● **Raising Meat Birds–Cornish Cross vs. Heritage Broilers**

There are two different birds being raised as pastured poultry and each have its good points and bad.

- The Cornish X (cross) is a heavy, fast-growing bird and they are leaner than the Heritage birds. They go to market between 49-56 days and have white feathers. Some of their problems are becoming too fat and their legs will not hold them up, along with the males being heavier and having a higher mortality rate than the females. You have to encourage them to leave their house to forage. Moving their feeders outside can do this. Cornish Xs tend to have “Flips” a heart attack when the bird just flips on its back and dies. Another problem is ascites–water on the heart.
- The Heritage breed has a strong chicken taste but is not as meaty as the Cornish X. They are designed for pasture and forage well. Having dark feathers is also against them; if they are not mature at processing time this causes them to have dark spots on the skin.

● **Getting Started**

The first thing you want to do when you start into pastured poultry is to find a reliable hatchery. Buy straight pen chicks, as they are the least expensive. Straight run means you will get a mixture of both sexes. When you get your chicks have the brooder ready and a 90 degree temperature with enough room for the chicks to spread out and get away from the direct heat of it if it gets too warm. Make sure there are no drafts, but plenty of air circulation. A solid walled container with an open top is good. You can use a large water trough or plywood walls about three feet high. Make sure the chicks have fresh food and water, as well as plenty of space at the trough, and can reach them. You can introduce grass to them at this time by adding grass clippings from an untreated lawn a little at a time. Eliminate wet bedding to keep health problems at bay. Different materials may be used for bedding such as wood shavings you purchase for your pet, wheat mixes or brands because the chicks can eat the bedding with no harm. The chicks need to be in the brooder 204 weeks depending on weather before moving

them outside. Moving chicks outside is stressful on them. They need a transition period before being completely outside. Make a small space outside the brooder, but with access to the brooder so they may come and go as they please. Check the weather before you put the chicks out. Try to pick a time with no rain forecasted at least for two days. Wet chicks can be dead chicks.

Labor is expensive so try to automate as much as possible. Maintain proper feeding spaces with added feeders and waterers as needed. Keep eye on the weather at all times and add extra tarps to pens if needed. Cold, wet broilers resurrect easily, just add heat. Should your birds get chilled, try some sugar water.

● **Methods for Pasturing Poultry–Housing**

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There are many different types of houses used in pastured poultry. The Salatin house is a lightweight house that can be moved easily. A 10 x 12 x 18 house can hold about 92 birds. It is made of wood usually with a solid tin roof or part tin and the rest in small spaced wire. You can use anything to make these pens, but remember, these must be moved everyday so keep them light. They are not expensive to build. Some of the disadvantages of this type of house are with land predators getting in. They must be moved everyday. Birds are hard to catch in them because you must get on hands and knees to catch the birds. If you have a long set spell, the birds may be sitting in mud.

A different version of this house is made tall enough to stand in. It can be floored with most anything or left un-floored with just the loose 2 x 4s for the birds to roost on. This house can be made of two or three cattle panels on a wooden frame. Put a door in the front with a ridge polo frame with wire all around it and cover with tarps. By putting an electric fence around it the birds can be let out in the daytime and put up at night to help with predator problem. These houses are still light enough to be moved by hand or even a riding lawn mower if you add some wheels to the back of the house. There is a permanent house that sets in the center of the pasture, with pens going out from different parts of the house by way of small doors. That way all you have to do is shut all the doors but the one you are using and each pen gets to rest before it is used again.

● **Feeding/Pasture/Water/Health Issues**

Feeding broilers depends on the type of birds you have. The Cornish X can be fed a 19 ½ percent feed its entire life. You can reduce the Heritage birds to 16 percent at eight to nine weeks and they will be fine. Cultured soybeans are the best to use in your feed with roasted beans next. If you can't find either of them, then you can use soybean meal with some soy oil added back in. They also must have corn and basic nutrients. A good source of a feed mix is from Fertrell's at Bainbridge Pennsylvania. Their website is www.fertrells.com. At five weeks you can add whole wheat up to 40 percent but it must have grit. Ground alfalfa is also good for them. The Cornish X gets about 15 percent of its food from pasture and the Heritage breeds get even more. You can overseed your pasture with clover at 1-3 pounds per acre. The birds seem to like the crimson clover best. A great pasture would contain the crimson clover, alfalfa, and some legumes. Mow the pasture to 3-4 inches before adding the birds. There is some debate as to using the same ground more than once in a year. This depends on your management and your land. An inexpensive feeder can be made from 4-inch PVC pipe and 2x4s. Cut a 3-inch section out of the

side of the pipe, and then bolt it to the two parallel 2x4s far enough apart so the birds don't crowd each other.

Poultry need clean fresh water at all times. The waterers need to be hung slightly higher than the back of the birds. This is to keep the birds from throwing up feed back into the water. This is true for all open waterers.

It is also very important to maintain good broiler health. A dead bird is a total loss. You can try to prevent some health problems organically. You can use apple cider vinegar (ACV) and garlic in the water, which is good for the general health of the birds. Use ¼ cup ACV and 1 clove of garlic broken into pieces in each 5 gallon bucket of water. ACV adjusts the pH of the birds gut and garlic is a natural antibiotic. Cayenne or hot pepper powder can be used in the feed to help keep coccidiosis down. A side benefit is that it also keeps mice out of the feed. Poultry don't mind the pepper because they don't have taste receptors in their mouths. The pepper powder can be bought in bulk from www.frontierherbs.com if your birds get this disease, use raw milk that is not pasteurized to help them. It coats the stomach and intestines. Feed as a sole ration for 3-4 days. Coccidiosis is one of the feed health problems. Another disease threat is ascites (fluid built around the heart, caused by stress). Some sign of these problems include birds just sitting around, a purplish comb, and wheezing sound. Flips are another problem, mainly with the Cornish X—a heart attack brought on the bird gaining weight too fast. There is no cure for this but the slowing down of weight gain can lessen it. Other preventative measures include clean bedding, proper spacing of birds, and wood ashes in a box. The birds can dust themselves from this box.

- **Predators**

Predators are another way of losing birds. Some predators can be recognized by what is left behind after the attack. If it is just a pile of feathers by the fence, then it was probably a fox. When just the head and neck is missing; an owl is to blame. A raccoon may be to blame if the wings and legs are left. Just bits and pieces may be a cat and wholesale slaughter is probably mink, weasel or ferret. Electric fencing can help with these predators and some people add geese to their birds to warn the birds of hawks. Human error, weather, stress, disease, and predators account for 10 percent to 40 percent of losses.

- **Processing: What Every Poultry Producer Needs to Know**

The processor expects you to bring healthy birds that have been handled gently to avoid bruising them. You should be on time and pay promptly or you may not get your birds processed a second time. You have the right to expect quality work from your processor. He or she should process your birds in a timely and humane way and there should be good communication between you and the processor. A processing plant that is USDA means you can sell your birds out of state. With a state inspection plant you should ask the owner as rules vary from state to state.

Preparing your birds for processing can be a matter of common sense. Withhold food and water about twelve hours ahead of your appointment. This lessens the chance of getting food or manure on the carcass. Handle your birds carefully to reduce bruising. Don't overcrowd and consider your travel time. Limit it to four hours at the most.

Think about how you are going to transport the birds home safely once they have been processed. Ice chests and coolers with ice work well for a small number of birds. A refrigerated truck works for a large batch of birds. Just be sure to keep them chilled.

Dressed weight of the birds can be estimated from the line weight by percentages. Broilers of Cornish Xs should dress out at about 75 percent of line weight. Heritage broilers are about 60 percent since they are not as meaty. Spent layers (old layers that are molting) are about 62 percent; tom turkeys dress out around 80 percent, while the hen turkeys go about 82 percent, with duck and geese about 60 percent.

Your birds could be turned away from the processor if there is a discrepancy of quantity, size, age, health and, most important, appointment time. The birds need to be cooled by either cold water or cold air. They should have a body temperature of 40 degrees before they are bagged. They should also be chilled one or two days before freezing so that they will be tender. You can buy your bags from the Internet at www.uline.com or call Williamsport Bag at 507.326.4679. The shelf life of a fresh bird depends on how it is packaged. Vacuum-packed birds should last eight days maximum. In a regular bag, four days is best. You can freeze shrink-wrapped birds up to one year.

- **Pitfalls to Pastured Broiler Enterprises**

- Very labor intensive
- Seasonal job in the mid-south and northern states
- Birds are susceptible to predators and disease from wildlife
- Finding a quality processor may be hard
- Selling to the public who sometimes don't understand why the birds are worth more

- **Sales**

Sales are the main reason you are raising pastured poultry. USDA inspected birds give you a multitude of sale possibilities. You can direct sell to friends and family. Try restaurant or wholesale, farmers markets, poultry CSA or work with a producer with pastured poultry being a value added product. Be proactive in your business. Set your hours. Consider these questions: Will you have Sunday sales? What days will you have off? What about a return policy? Most importantly, consider your pricing. Believe in your products and be proud of it. Don't hem-haw around about the price of your birds. Don't say, "I usually get ... for a bird"; you just let yourself open for haggling. If people say, "I would really like to use your birds, but can't afford them," pass them by. If they really want your product, they will find the money. Be sure to hold fast to your prices.

The following is a record of the question and answer session from the Pastured Broiler Production and Marketing short course.

At what temperature should you scald your bird?

147 degrees

What do you do with the by-products?

They can be composted by mixing with sawdust

What about bird flu?

The government seems to be taking a wait-and-see stance. No one is sure how it is spread. Some think it is by people transporting and some say the biggest threat is from show birds and birds in transit.

What are some other ideas about selling birds?

Do a bird-of-the-month club; have a policy of the more you buy, the less price per pound; sell to health clubs; advertise in health food stores; invite people to your farm to see the birds and tell them about them and why they are better for you; branch out into different areas of pastured poultry such as selling eggs.

What is NAIS?

National Animal Identification Service.

What is the best way to catch a chicken?

City style, reach down and pick up the bird and hug close to your body. Country style, reach down and catch by the leg. You can grab one leg of 3 different birds at a time—they don't flail around as much and it cuts down on catch time.

How about catching and carrying turkeys?

Turkeys are curious birds and will usually come to the back of the vehicle to be caught. When you carry the turkey catch both feet in one hand and support the body under the wings with the other hand.

If chickens are put into a crate upside down, will they right themselves?

Most will but the Cornish Xs need to be helped.

What about brooder space?

In a 4 x 4 area you can put 200 chicks.

What about propane brooders?

With a propane brooder, it is possible to brood and pasture in the same house in the field without electric.

How long can processed birds stay in the chilling water?

They need to stay until the body temperature is 40 degrees. Turkeys will take longer but still go by body temperature. You can leave the birds overnight if you need to.