

Pastured Poultry Production with Research on Sustainability of Grazing Lands

Final Report for FW00-093

Project Type: Farmer/Rancher

Funds awarded in 2000: \$1,477.00

Projected End Date: 12/31/2004

Region: Western

State: Wyoming

Principal Investigator:

[Joleen and Greg Marquardt](#)

Project Information

Abstract:

OBJECTIVES

The objective was to show that pastured poultry is a viable and profitable means of diversification for an existing ranch or farm operation.

ABSTRACT

Joleen and Greg Marquardt set out to raise 2,500 chickens grazed as pastured poultry on native grass - along with adding a high-protein feed supplement into their diets, from early April to mid October. They then planned to process the chickens and market them in a 50-mile radius of their farming operation in Pine Bluff, Wyo.

Their experiment with pastured poultry was to test their ability to incorporate the chicken operation into their existing farm and make money doing it. The research entailed testing their abilities to raise the chicks in a brood house, transport them to pasture, grow them to the appropriate size, prepare them for market and sell the finished product to area consumers.

SPECIFIC RESULTS

The Marquardt family raised five batches of chickens - 500 every eight weeks. Despite extreme drought and other unanticipated losses, they processed and sold 2,200 chickens in their proposed market area. In the process they learned several lessons about a pastured poultry enterprise.

- Timely delivery of the chickens from the hatchery is critical. The largest losses resulted from slow shipping, sometimes delayed by a day from the time the chicks hatched.
- Chicks also suffer from improper bedding. The Marquardts switched from straw, which holds the moisture, to wood shavings, which seal off the moisture. The shavings also allow adding more bedding instead of changing it while still keeping the pen dry.
- The grass should not be grazed more than once per season, especially under dry conditions. Grazing the same area two years is acceptable.
- A stock trailer normally used for cattle proved to be the best method of moving the chickens from the brooder pens to the pasture pens. "It was big enough for the

chickens to spread out, and we could take all 500 at once," says Joleen Marquardt. "By spreading some feed around the floor, it kept them from piling up in the corners." The trailer also worked for hauling the chickens from the pasture to be processed.

- Incorporating an assembly-line method of processing greatly increased the number of birds processed per hour.

- Marquardt says the marketing was probably the easiest part of the SARE-funded project, in large measure because of the overwhelming response for fresh, grass-fed poultry. "The main comment we heard from our customers," says Marquardt, "was that they were tired of the chicken you buy in the supermarket - that there was simply no comparison between a store-bought chicken and our fresh fryers."

In addition to the success in raising, processing and selling pastured poultry, Marquardt cites impacts on her family and community. She was able to make about the same amount of money as working in town six to eight hours a day, five days a week. The chickens required only two hours a day and two really long days for processing every five weeks. Plus, her children helped with the chores, learning the value of work and sharing in the profits. And the community benefited by having fresh, wholesome chicken.

POTENTIAL BENEFITS

The main purpose of the project - to show that pastured poultry could be a means of profitable diversification - succeeded, which means the project can serve as a model for others farmers, including farm youth, seeking similar benefits.

"Natural fertilizer for pasture ground and the production of a good, wholesome product are both attractive outcomes," says Marquardt.

Yet another benefit, she says, is that the pastured-poultry operation runs only spring to mid fall, freeing time off-season for other endeavors.

FARMER ADOPTION AND DIRECT IMPACT

Farmers and ranchers in the area initially thought the Marquardts were making too little money on the project for too much work. When informed the opposite was true, and when they learned how the operation worked, they wanted to learn more. One neighbor who raises layer chickens and sells the eggs in town, benefited as the Marquardts passed the word onto their customers who now buy the neighbor's fresh eggs.

"Our objective in the project was to show that pastured poultry as a means of diversification on the family farm was possible for our area of the country and also profitable," says Marquardt. "I think it would be a good alternative for any family farm looking to make more income on their place without one or both of the spouses having to work elsewhere."

FUTURE RECOMMENDATIONS OR NEW HYPOTHESES

Marquardt would like to try more than one variety of bird to compare the heartiness, growth and ease of processing. She would also like to raise parent stock on pasture to breed in heartiness, as has been done in the East, and to test grass to compare nutrient levels of pasture that has been grazed only by cattle or livestock other than poultry.

DISSEMINATION OF FINDINGS

Toward the end of the season, several local publications contacted the Marquardts, hoping to write articles on their pastured-poultry project, but it was too late in the season. So they planned to set up interviews the following season with the publications as well as local television stations.

"I think that with a year's experience, I would be more comfortable doing an interview next season," says Joleen Marquardt.

Pamphlets the Marquardts produced helped them market the chickens, although a redesign is planned. Also, with an established database of customers, direct mailing to them will include an order form for the entire season.

PRODUCER INVOLVEMENT

The Marquardts were the only producers involved in the project.

Research

Participation Summary

Any opinions, findings, conclusions, or recommendations expressed in this publication are those of the author(s) and do not necessarily reflect the view of the U.S. Department of Agriculture or SARE.



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