



Niche Poultry Enterprises in New England



A guide for farmers and farm service providers

Produced by New Entry Sustainable Farming Project

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The information in this guide comes from a set of interviews conducted with people farming on rented land all over North America in addition to New Entry Sustainable Farming Project's experience placing farmers on rented land in Massachusetts.

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Introduction

Poultry in New England

Poultry farming has a long history in New England. Some of the most iconic American poultry breeds carry the names of their New England origins, such as New Hampshire and Rhode Island Reds, Plymouth Rocks, and Narragansett turkeys. At one time, the region was a major producer of poultry products.

It has been many decades since broilers (chickens bred and raised specifically for meat) were a big business in New England. Broiler enterprises have started making a comeback in the region in recent years, but they tend to look very different from the standard broiler operations you'd find in Maryland or Georgia. Scale is the most obvious difference: A typical broiler producer in New England might market somewhere between

500 and 5,000 chickens per year, whereas a middle-of-the-road Southern broiler operation may grow upwards of half a million birds. Large-scale Southern and Midwestern operations raise batches of thousands of broilers in long metal broiler houses, while in the Northeast you're more likely to find farmers moving groups of 50 to 100 broilers across fields in open-bottomed mobile coops or "chicken tractors."

Despite these differences – or, perhaps more accurately, because of them – it is possible for a Massachusetts farmer to make more money raising 1,000 broilers on pasture than what a conventional broiler grower nets for 50,000 broilers. There is a strong market in New England for locally raised meat, and pasture-raised broilers commonly demand \$4 to \$7 per pound at farmers markets. While very few producers are able to

grow and market enough pasture-raised broilers to make a full-time living at it, with niche marketing and smart management, a few pens of broilers can be a profitable enterprise with minimal startup cost as part of a diversified farm operation or as a supplement for off-farm income.

The situation is similar for egg enterprises. A few large flocks of laying hens remain in New England, but the vast majority of eggs consumed here come from the Mid-Atlantic, Midwest, or Southeast states. Yet many small New England farmers see their eggs fly off the shelf at their farm stand or farmers market booth for \$4.50 to as much as \$8 a dozen in some markets.

So, if demand is so strong, where's all the supply? If the market opportunity is so great, why isn't poultry a bigger business in New England?

Project overview

With support from a Northeast SARE Partnership Grant, we set out to determine the most important challenges for profitable niche poultry enterprises in New England and some ways that producers have overcome those challenges. We worked with several small-scale poultry growers to track best practices and build enterprise budgets for alternative poultry enterprises in New England. For purposes of this guide, we will focus primarily on two chicken enterprises: laying hens, with fresh eggs as the primary product; and broilers, with whole roasting birds as the primary product.

The participating farmers in this project came from Eastern and Central Massachusetts, although several farmers and farm service providers were consulted from Maine, Connecticut, Rhode Island and New Hampshire. Some other general characteristics of the participating farms:

- Young enterprises (1 to 10 years in operation)
- Emphasis on direct marketing (both eggs and meat)
- All farms incorporated outdoor production for both broilers and layers, and most farms focused on pasture-raised poultry.
- None of the farmers relied on poultry as a primary source of income, although for most it was an important secondary income source.
- Most farmers did not raise poultry exclusively, but rather alongside other farm enterprises, including vegetables, greenhouse/nursery crops, and livestock enterprises.
- The farms were split evenly between those who raised both broilers and layers, and those who raised only one or the other.
- Broiler production ranged from 400 to 1,800 birds/year.
- Egg flocks ranged from 50 to 500 hens.

Read on to see what these producers reported as their biggest challenges, best practices, and their advice for new poultry farmers.



Challenges, Solutions, and Best Practices

Challenge: Processing options for broilers

This was a critical issue for all of the participating broiler enterprises. In short, the recommendation is: Before you start sinking too much money and time into starting a small-scale broiler enterprise, figure out how you're going to get the birds processed. Legal, affordable slaughter and processing options are limited for many New England producers. There are a few USDA-inspected poultry processors in the region, and for those living within driving distance of one of these, it is probably the simplest option: Schedule with the slaughterhouse, drop off the birds, and pick up bagged, ready-to-sell product. However, the cost of processing can be an issue – the going rate is around \$5 per chicken. And for some farms, USDA processing

involves hauling the birds long distances, which can be costly because of the fuel, mileage and time involved (sometimes requiring two different round trips); because of the size of truck and the crates needed to haul a large enough number of birds to make the trip worthwhile (standard chicken transportation crates, which can hold 6 to 10 birds – such as the blue crates you'll see in some of this guide's pictures, manufactured by Kuhl Corp. – usually cost at least \$50 each); and because long trips can result in mortalities during transport, a particularly costly time to lose birds which often represent an investment of over \$15 in feed, labor, and the initial cost of the chick and any vaccinations.

For those growers, and for those looking to reduce processing expenses and to have more control over the quality of their final product, there are special USDA exemptions that allow

farmers to process their own poultry using a mobile poultry processing unit or by building their own licensed on-farm facility. This can save the producer a significant amount of money, and can even be a great marketing tool, but it can also open a regulatory can of worms (depending in large part on your state's laws). It also means quite a bit of additional work, especially in the first year. Understanding the available processing options and which one is the best fit for you is an essential part – according to some of the producers we spoke with, the most essential part – of running a successful small-scale broiler enterprise in New England.

One solution: On-farm processing

For growers who find that hauling live birds to the nearest USDA-inspected facility is not feasible, or that it is a significant drag on their

profitability, on-farm processing can be a valuable alternative. Some farmers have built their own on-farm facilities, either stationary or mobile (see our guide, [Building an On-farm Poultry Processing Facility](#)).¹ Unless you already have the equipment and knowhow, this requires a substantial initial investment in time and money, and (depending on your state and local government) can also require quite a bit of patience and persistence working with regulators. However, once these initial hurdles are cleared, owning a licensed on-farm facility can have many benefits, including:

- No per-bird processing fees.
- Control over the quality of your end product.
- Flexibility of processing dates.

The last point may be particularly important for some enterprises. Drew, one of the farmers

¹ <http://nesfp.org/resources/building-farm-poultry-processing-facility-0>

Dealing with regulations

One grower had great difficulty convincing his local Board of Health to allow him to process and sell broilers on his farm using an MPPU. After a long and trying process, though, he finally secured permission. His advice:

“Educate and prepare yourself the best that you can because there is a lot of doubt and resistance along the way that you will need to explain to people – from some potential customers all the way to state regulators. In my case it mainly came down to the town regulators.

“... It was awful. They knew nothing about it, and some of them didn't want to know.

So you've got that working against you. And some people just get angry when you start talking about food. But we had a sit down with the town manager and showed them that we did all our homework. It's about educating yourself and being prepared, but sometimes you also just have to find the right person to deal with.”

Then he added:

“You can see how people would be like, ‘Is it really worth it?’ At times I was like that, too. But all of the effort along the way was well worth it.”

in this project, moves most of his broilers through restaurant sales, and could sell many more broilers if he were able to provide a more regular supply of fresh birds. Some restaurants may buy frozen birds, but he has found that fresh birds are strongly preferred. After processing, broilers can only be refrigerated for 4-7 days (depending on who you ask) before they should be either cooked or frozen. So, in order to supply restaurants with 100 birds per week, he would need to process 100 birds per week – rather than, for example, 400 birds every four weeks, which is a more cost effective way to schedule processing at a USDA plant or when renting a mobile poultry processing unit (MPPU) for on-farm processing. Although Drew is currently processing birds every week or every other week through a mix of the latter two options (renting the Eastern Massachusetts MPPU and taking birds to a USDA plant), he is in the process of constructing his own MPPU so that he may process his birds on his own schedule. As a bonus, he may be able to take the MPPU to other farms and process poultry as a paid service.

Challenge: Labor for laying flocks

In most of the egg enterprises involved in this project, the cost of labor, when valued at anywhere from \$10 to \$15/hour, was the difference between an enterprise finishing in the black or in the red. One small egg enterprise looked fairly good on paper when labor costs were excluded; but when the net revenue was applied toward the labor invested, the farmer earned a “wage” of just \$1.29 per hour. Another farmer appeared to have broken even in her first year

laying enterprise, but only if she was willing to accept working for 35 cents an hour.

In the data collected through this project, perhaps no figure varied more widely between farms than labor. For broiler operations, this mainly had to do with whether or not the farmer did their own processing, but the same variation was present in laying flocks. There were three main culprits on the farms that reported significantly more hours of labor:

- Marketing labor
- Egg collection and handling
- Production inefficiencies

Marketing proved to be a big time sink for some operations. The farm reporting the fewest hours of labor per day sold all of their eggs through an unstaffed farm stand; the two which reported the most hours sold at a farmers market and deliveries to customers’ homes, adding 8 to 16 hours of labor per week. Some differences were also related to inefficiencies in egg collection and handling and in production inefficiencies (see below).

Another factor involved was scale – the flocks with the most hours of labor also had the most birds. However, the correlation was not at all direct, and as one farmer attests later in this guide (see “Finding Economies of Scale”), while the total hours of labor increases between a flock with 100 hens and one with 300 or 500, the hours of labor per bird (and per egg) decrease significantly. Scaling up production, and finding economies of scale for labor, can substantially reduce the cost of labor – and thus increase the profit margin – per egg.

One solution: Egg collection and handling equipment

One farmer found that collecting eggs from her new flock of 300 laying hens was taking up much more time than she had anticipated. She estimates that buying some egg handling equipment reduced collection and handling time by 10 minutes a day, saving over 24 hours over the course of just one season.

“There were a few rookie mistakes we made, even just on egg collection...I was so focused on getting these birds in the spring, I didn’t really think enough about how we were going to handle all of the eggs. But there are things you can buy in the poultry catalogs that can help you, and those were definitely worth the money. At first I felt like I was buying in a lot of infrastructure, but you realize that it really is important to have egg collection baskets instead of five gallon buckets, and you really do need egg tray organizers in your fridge because you can’t always wash eggs right away, especially if you’re also vegetable farming. Now we have our system, and handling the flow of eggs is not a big deal.”

Another solution: Watering innovations

At one farm which reported 1.5 hours average spent on daily chores (not including egg collection and handling), birds were given water through plastic jug waterers which often needed to be filled twice a day – plus, since there was no water at the field, water was hauled to the field in buckets every day. Another farm spent half the time on chores despite having twice as many hens. That operation did not have access to water in the field either, but instead of

hauling it in buckets, they could haul several weeks’ worth of water to the field in a single trip, thanks to a mobile water tank. Instead of jug waterers, they hung gravity-fed waterers which refill automatically throughout the day, eliminating the need for a special trip to the coops in the middle of the day just to refill the waterers.

An additional recommended watering system efficiency is replacing jug or bell waterers with nipple waterers. This is essentially an anecdotal recommendation, given that none of the participating farms have actually implemented it yet, but it comes highly recommended from larger producers who have installed nipple waterers, and several of this project’s participating producers plan to pilot this.

Challenge: Year-round egg production

Laying hens eat roughly the same amount (depending on a few factors, from .2 to .35 lb/day) whether or not they happened to lay an egg that day. They may eat more during colder weather in order to produce additional body heat. As it happens, that also coincides with the time of year when the hen’s biological clock, sensing the shortening day length, sends the signal to put less energy toward laying eggs. After all, in the wild, why would you want your chicks to hatch in the middle of winter?

This means that if left to their own devices, hens will decrease their rate of lay through the fall and winter months, which may mean shutting it down entirely. One participating farmer collected data that demonstrates this clearly. In September and October, his 55 hens produced

183 dozen eggs in 8 weeks. This comes out to 5 eggs per hen each week, or a 71% rate of lay (5 eggs / 7 days = .71 eggs per day). In November and December the flock's rate of lay dropped to 57% (about 4 eggs per hen each week) and in January and February it fell to 43% ... yet during all of this time, the hens were going through roughly the same amount of feed.

One solution: Artificially extending day length

In order to prevent such a dip in the rate of lay – and, therefore, in feed efficiency – producers installed lights inside the coops, connected to a timer which turns on in the mornings, before the chickens have been let out, leading them to believe that the day has already started. The lights must be timed to turn on at least 14 hours before sunset, since chickens need about 14 hours of light per day to maintain egg production (maximum laying potential occurs at around 16 hours of daylight). Do a bit of homework before installing the lights – for example, the type of “cool” spectrum fluorescent bulb often used in offices and households will not trick the hens into thinking it's daytime, but a “warm” spectrum bulb or an incandescent bulb will.²

Challenge: Managing risk in the field, preventing losses

The process of actually raising the birds isn't a cakewalk, but the learning curve isn't particularly steep – at least in terms of keeping most of the birds alive and bringing them to market at a reasonable size in a reasonable amount of time

² See this University of Nebraska guide for more details: http://www.hort.purdue.edu/tristate_organic/poultry_2007/Light_Management.pdf



(depending on genetics, preferences, and production approach, usually somewhere between 4 to 7 pounds in 6 to 11 weeks). The most-cited production challenges relate to preventing catastrophe, particularly in the form of predators and disease losses. For non-vaccinated birds, coccidiosis was the most noticeable disease problem. Growers also observed a general tendency for fast-growing Cornish Cross broilers to have health problems as they approached a market weight of 7 pounds – or, especially, if they surpassed it – including a higher rate of

mortality compared to slower-growing broiler varieties (e.g. “Freedom Rangers”).

For those raising poultry on pasture, predator pressure can be a very significant risk factor. Producers participating in this project reported losses as high as 7% annually from predators, and losses can be much higher in specific batches. For free-ranging birds, aerial predators – hawks and owls – can take a significant toll, and can be difficult to exclude; however, these losses are usually one chicken (or young turkey) at a time, spread out over the season.

Ground predators, on the other hand, may be responsible for killing large numbers of birds in a single night. Coyotes are a persistent predator for poultry growers in New England, particularly as many of the area’s coyotes become increasingly accustomed to human environments. However, coyotes may be satisfied to only take one bird at a time. Arguably the most devastating predators in New England are those which are known to cause extensive casualties in a single event: domestic dogs and members of the weasel family, including the particularly infamous fisher cats. Producers reported having lost as many as 30 birds in a single night from fisher cat attacks. In a recent year, one of the participating producers lost nearly 100 broilers – 6% of the birds he raised that year – due to repeated attacks by a neighborhood dog.

One solution: Electrified netting for predator control

The common theme in most losses from ground predators was a problem with fencing. The neighborhood dog was not deterred by the three strands of electric fencing which surrounded that farmer’s broilers. Once inside the fence, the dog would dig under the mobile

coops that housed the broilers. Other dog, weasel and fisher cat attacks occurred when fencing had been accidentally left off overnight.

At the conclusion of this project, the participating producers’ consensus pick for predator-proof fencing was electrified netting. The fencing should be specifically “poultry netting” rather than the types designed for sheep and goats, as the smaller size of the netting is more effective in excluding predators in the weasel family. An additional recommendation, to make sure the fence is hitting with enough voltage to deter any potential ground predator that approaches it: Buy a fence tester, and test the fence frequently.

Challenge: Feed costs

For all of the broiler enterprises in this project, feed was the biggest cost. For laying enterprises, feed was second only to labor. For those buying organic grain, feed costs are especially steep. Depending on a wide range of factors, broiler producers purchased 3 to 6 lbs of feed for every 1 lb of meat marketed, somewhere around \$2 of feed for each pound of meat. Laying flocks reported feed costs of \$0.75 to \$2 per dozen eggs. Some feed was lost to spillage around feeders, and nutritional value can be lost when feed is kept for too long or not stored properly, but a large part of reducing feed costs appears to revolve around improving feed conversion rates – that is, the efficiency at which the birds convert feed into meat or eggs. Genetics plays a large role in feed efficiency; for example, a Cornish Cross and a slower-growing broiler can both be raised to produce a 5 lb roasting bird, but the slower-growing broiler will probably need an additional 1-4 weeks – and, in the

process, several more pounds of feed – to get there. Management factors also play an important role; for example, in cold temperatures, feed efficiency may be reduced because more feed is being used for body heat rather than growth.

One solution: Finding economies of scale

After producers examined their numbers for a season, this was a common theme for both broiler and layer enterprises. For both broilers and layers, the participating producers – and also the more established New England producers consulted as part of this project – nearly unanimously found that scaling up is an essential part of profitability. In other words, a small poultry enterprise can only be so small if it's going to be profitable.

How many broilers or layers do you need to raise in order to be profitable? That magic number is bound to be a moving target, and it will be different for every farmer. Some farmers did have some numbers in mind for their own enterprises. Here is one farmer's thoughts on economy of scale for a niche egg enterprise:

“The biggest flock I had worked with before was 100 hens, which didn't feel all that overwhelming. But having run the numbers for 300 chickens, it makes me realize those hundred chickens probably weren't adding much to the financial side of the farm. There is more work between 100 and 300, but your financial return increases more than the additional work you put into it. Still, 300 hens is probably too small. Honestly, if you're going to do it, I think you should go big. If you've

never worked with chickens at all, maybe you should have a small flock just to see if you even like doing it; but if you want to make it work as a business and you're going to put in all that startup cost—which isn't going to be very different between 100 or 300 or even 500 chickens—to offset those startup costs, I feel like you can really go for it.”

Another farmer shared the sentiment:

“With the egg demand we have, I wish I would've got 200 or 300 hens right out of the gate.”

For both layers and broilers, many of the producers connect their “magic number” to reach an economy of scale with the ability to transition from bagged feed to bulk feed. Nearly all of the farmers in the project currently buy all of their poultry feed in 50 lb. bags, the standard unit for small flocks. Feed can also be purchased in bulk directly from the mill, at several cents per pound less than bagged feed; however, since feed begins to spoil and lose nutritional value as it sits in a grain bin, poultry nutritionists recommend feeding it within a month of delivery, and the minimum order for bulk grain is usually three tons. So, in order to reach a scale at which buying bulk feed makes sense, a producer needs to have enough birds to eat three tons of feed in a month.

It is also worth mentioning that some of the same producers who emphasized the importance of scaling up also recommended starting small and getting your feet wet before jumping all the way in. One grower who had some challenges selling all the broilers he raised in his first year said:

“The biggest piece of advice that I could give is to start small, work the bugs out and go through all of the motions before fully committing.”

For that grower, the problem was not production – he raised two batches of about 200 broilers on pasture in chicken tractors which he constructed, and he did not find any of that to be overwhelming. But in retrospect, he says he would have either started with smaller numbers or done more marketing upfront to ensure that he could sell all of the birds quickly. He summed it up this way:

“Scale up, just not too fast.”

And one more thing: Finding – and building – your market

Another way to put this might be: “Figure out what you need to charge, then figure out who will pay it.” Or, more succinctly: “Patience is a virtue.”

Despite the premium prices on display at many farmers markets and all the indications that there is a large latent demand for locally grown niche poultry products in New England, it is usually not as easy as “grow it and they will come.”

After having no trouble selling his eggs for a good price out of his farm stand through only word-of-mouth marketing, one grower was surprised when broilers didn’t sell as easily.

“This year the hardest thing for me to do is the marketing, trying to get people to understand the cost of real food. And my broilers are not

even organic yet.”

It’s worth noting that this grower was limited to selling directly to consumers through pre-orders, due to his local Board of Health’s requirement that all of his broilers be sold the same day they were processed. It’s also worth noting that it was only his second season selling broilers, and that halfway through his third season he was finding it significantly easier to sell his broilers (at \$5.25/lb for Cornish Cross and \$5.75 for Freedom Rangers).

Another grower connected with several high-end restaurants and now has a market well beyond the 1,800 broilers he produces each year. He has to charge a bit less when selling to restaurants, but finds it worthwhile because he knows his birds are spoken for before they’re processed, and because selling to restaurants requires less marketing labor compared to, for example, a farmers market.

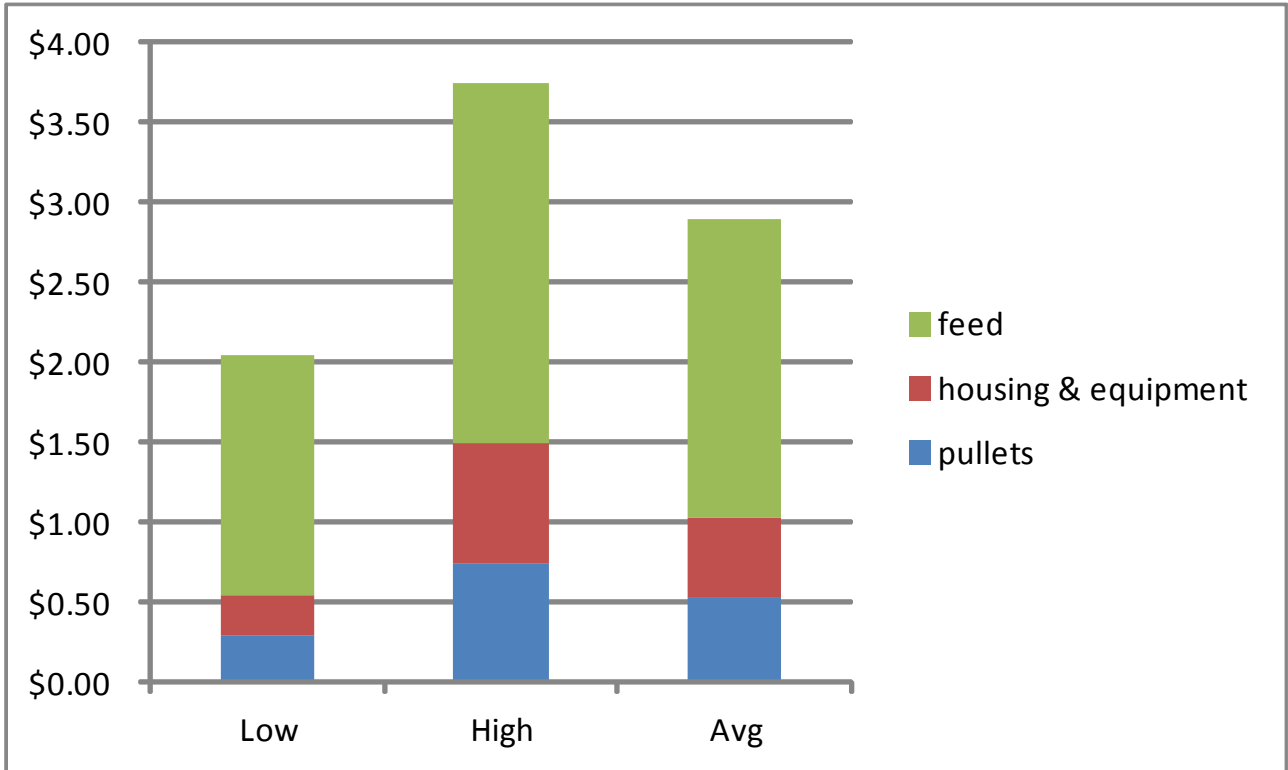
Your marketing and pricing approach might be different if you already have a market in mind, especially if reaching that market is an important part of why you even want to raise poultry. For example, one of the participating farmers strongly believed that her meat and eggs should be available to everyday consumers, not just those able to regularly pay a premium price or those who might occasionally buy expensive local eggs or meat as a luxury product:

“I refuse to even try to charge something that I wouldn’t pay, regardless of what the market might bear. I want the average family to be able to buy it. ... I think everybody should be able to eat good eggs.”

Composite Budget: Niche Egg Enterprise

Assumptions: 200 hens, 52 week production period, cumulative 7% loss
Year-round production, raised outdoors in “eggmobiles,” overwintering in greenhouse.
Average 4-5 eggs per hen per week

Primary production costs (before labor) per dozen eggs



Before labor, the average cost to produce each dozen eggs was **\$2.90**. Among participating producers, this figure varied from \$2.05 to \$3.75. On average, feed accounted for \$1.50 to \$2.25 per dozen. Participating producers did not use organic feed; if they had, feed costs would likely have been over \$3 per dozen.

Composite Budget: Niche Egg Enterprise

PRIMARY EXPENSES

Variable costs	Quantity	Cost per unit	Total cost
Pullets (w/ shipping)	200	\$9.95	\$1,989
Feed (50 lb bags)	291	\$25	\$7,280
Labor (hours)	275	\$15	\$4,125
Egg cartons and labels (for re-use)	2,000	\$0.30	\$600
<i>Total variable costs</i>			\$13,994
Fixed costs	Years	Total cost	Cost / year
Mobile coop	10	\$1,500	\$150
Feeders, waterers, fencing	7	\$1,200	\$171
Egg handling and storage	7	\$800	\$114
<i>Total depreciated fixed costs</i>			\$435
Other expenses (land, fuel/mileage, market fees etc.)			\$750
<i>Total annual expense</i>			\$15,129

REVENUES

Product	Quantity	Price per unit	Total
Eggs (dozen) (sold at farm stand)	3,727	\$5.00	\$18,633
<i>Gross revenue</i>			\$18,633
<i>Net revenue</i>			\$3,504

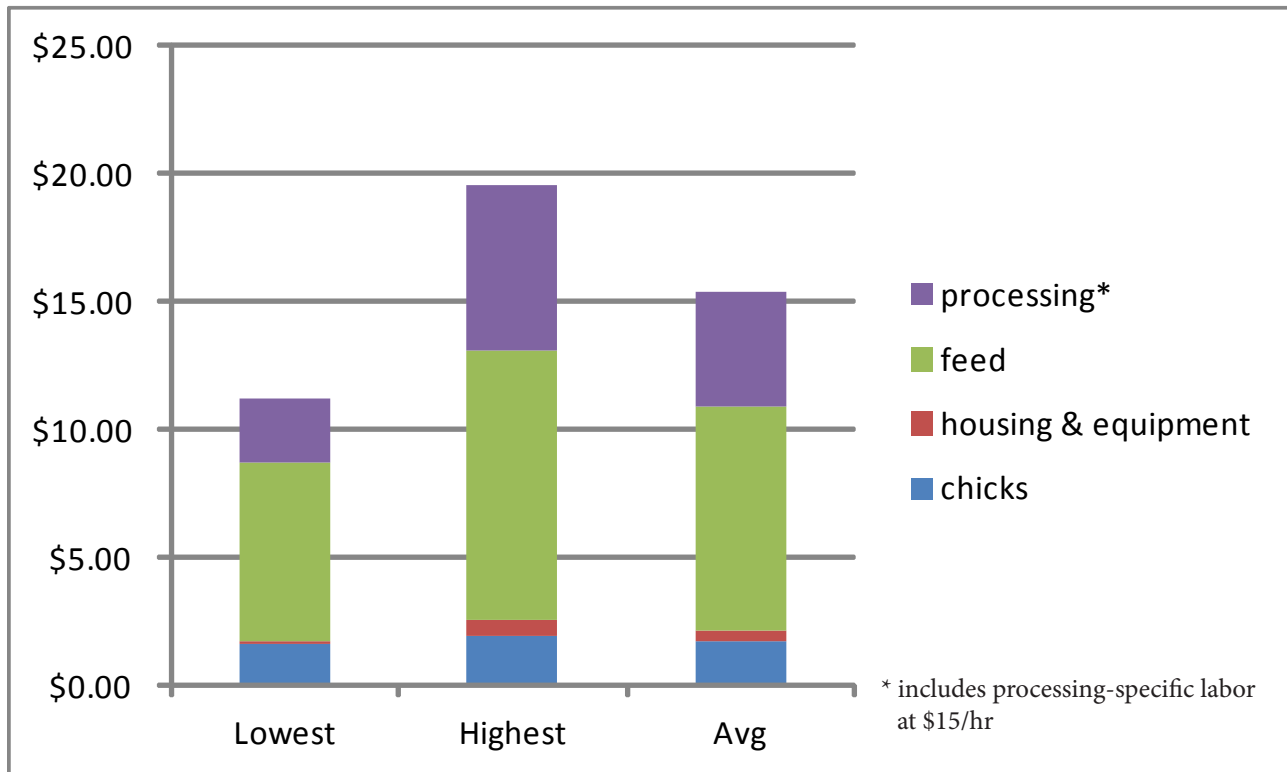
Composite Budget: Niche Broiler Enterprise

Assumptions: 900 chicks purchased, three runs of 300, 10% loss

50/50 mix of Cornish Cross and Freedom Rangers or other slow-growing broilers.

Average carcass weight 4.5 lbs.

Primary production costs (before labor) per 4.5 lb broiler



Before labor, the average cost to produce each 4.5 lb broiler carcass was **\$15.39**, or **\$3.42 per lb**. As expected, feed accounted for the largest cost share, ranging from \$7.00 to \$10.50 per bird. If producers had used organic feed, the feed cost would likely have been over \$15 per bird. The most variable expense was processing cost. One grower with access to on-farm processing spent only \$2.50 per bird on processing expenses, whereas another spent over \$6 per bird in fees and travel using a USDA processing plant.

Composite Budget: Niche Broiler Enterprise

PRIMARY EXPENSES

Variable costs	Quantity	Cost per unit	Total cost
Day-old chicks (w/ shipping)	900	\$1.75	\$1,575
Feed (50 lb bags)	382	\$25	\$9,550
Labor (hours)	168	\$15	\$2,520
<i>On-farm processing costs</i>			
MPPU rental & transport (per use)	3	\$350	\$1,050
Licensing fees	1	\$225	\$225
Bags/labels	900	\$0.30	\$270
Other processing supplies (ice, propane etc)	3	\$150	\$450
Processing labor (hours)	84	\$15	\$1,260
Marketing labor (hours)	24	\$15	\$360
<i>Total variable costs</i>			\$17,260
Fixed costs	Years	Total cost	Cost / year
Mobile coops (3)	5	\$600	\$120
Feeders, waterers, fencing	7	\$1,200	\$171
Processing equipment	7	\$300	\$43
Freezers/coolers	\$7	\$800	\$114
<i>Total depreciated fixed costs</i>			\$449
Other expenses (land, fuel/mileage, market fees etc.)			\$600
Total annual expense			\$18,309

REVENUES

Product	Quantity	Price per unit	Total
Whole birds - Cornish Cross (405 birds @ 5 lbs/ea.)	2,025	\$5.00	\$10,125
Whole birds - Red broilers (405 birds @ 4 lbs/ea.)	1,620	\$5.50	\$8,910
Giblets (livers, hearts, gizzards) (/lb)	175	\$2.50	\$438
<i>Gross revenue</i>			\$19,473
<i>Net revenue</i>			\$1,164

We'd like to hear from you!

For questions, comments, or help with your community's farmland mapping project, please contact:

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to build strong businesses,
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a resilient food system.