Kerr Center Poultry Report 2012

The 2012 Kerr Center Pastured Poultry project began with the delivery of 43 chicks (22 Columbian Wyandotte, 21 Delaware) on 2/6/12. The chicks were placed to brood in the portable modified chicken trailers inside a barn on the Kerr Center Ranch. Chicks were fed 20% protein non-medicated chick starter/grower and 1 gallon waters. A 30ml vitamin-electrolyte mix (4 oz packet dissolved in 2 gallons of water) was added to the waters to promote fast growth and early feathering. Heat lamps were used as needed.

Forty young Columbian Wyandotte and Delaware chickens were placed with livestock at Kerr Center’s Rock Creek Farm grazing site. Two summer interns, Rock Gremillion and Carrie Shirley managed 30 head of Angus and Pineywoods heifers on 50 acres of pasture. The poultry were moved to the location in the mobile coops at eight weeks of age. The livestock management consisted of moving the cattle twice a day giving them 2/10-5/10 of an acre for each move. The goal was to stomp the dead, over mature grass onto the ground for litter coverage to protect the soil. The poultry followed the cattle as they were moved. Initially the chickens were allowed to roam during the day to scratch and eat the fly larvae in the cattle feces which should help decrease the fly population. Also, the chickens scratch and scatter the patties, drying them out which helps kill off any strongyle eggs.

The chickens were initially moved once a week and were enclosed in an electric fence. In July, the chickens were moved at least every two days with no electric fence enclose. Predators were not an issue possibly due to the frequent moves, the presence of the livestock and closing them up each evening. Once egg laying started in mid July, several modifications were made to the mobile coops. The solid plywood floor was cut out and replaced in the middle with a wire bottom to decrease the labor of scraping the chicken manure out weekly. Nest boxed were added.

The livestock were worked on July 10 and July 30th 2012. Seven fecal samples were taken each time, three from Pineywoods and four from Angus heifers. The fecal samples were read under a microscope. The resulting fecal counts were very low, only 0-5 eggs per gram of feces. Strongyle eggs were present in the fecal counts. The pathogenic parasite which most affects cattle is the brown stomach worm (Ostertagia ostertagi). In order to rise to a level of concern, there need to be at least 200 eggs per gram of feces. The levels were extremely low and not a cause for concern. However, it is difficult to attribute this to the poultry. The summer of 2012 was extremely dry. Drought conditions persisted over the entire period the poultry were with the livestock. We also needed to feed hay during the last part of the summer, further complicating the study. Dry conditions, combined with low forage height (further reducing soil moisture levels), no morning dew and the feeding of hay can all negatively impact internal parasite numbers. Our feeling is the environmental conditions played a greater role in the low fecel count numbers than the poultry.

In conclusion, the poultry were successfully integrated into the rotational livestock program at the Kerr Center’s Rock Creek Farm. However, due to drought conditions and high summer temperatures, no direct correlation can be drawn between low fecal egg count numbers and the use of pastured poultry.