A Guide to Commercial Poultry Production in Florida[1]

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FACTORS IN PLANNING A POULTRY OPERATION

Independent or Contract Production

(1) Independent egg producers have the total responsibility for all planning, producing and marketing of eggs. They must provide houses, equipment, birds, feed, all supplies and management. Their risks are greater but potential profit or loss is also greater. There are no independent broiler producers.

(2) Contract poultry producers (broilers and eggs) provide land, labor, houses, equipment, taxes, utilities, and insurance. The contractor furnishes birds, feed, medication, supervision, and markets the product. The contractor picks up eggs or broilers at the farm and the producer is paid a base price per dozen or per pound plus an incentive bonus as stated in the contract.

In planning for a poultry operation, a determination should be made of all contractors operating within the area and the type of contract available.

Location Within Florida

Egg farms are located in counties all over the state; however, the major egg producing areas are the Tampa Bay area, all across Central Florida, northward to Nassau County, and scattered independent producers located across the northern part of the state.

Independent egg farms could be located in any county, however, make sure a market is available and zoning laws permit poultry farming. It would be well, however, to consider locating new farms well away from populated communities.

All commercial broiler producers are located in North Florida (counties north of Gainesville). It would not be feasible to establish a broiler farm in other counties, since essentially all broilers are produced under contract and, at present, contractors only operate in North Florida.

Investment

With building and equipment costs continuing to rise, it is difficult to set an accurate investment cost necessary to build and equip poultry houses. Today's investment for buildings and equipment alone are running approximately $5.00 - $7.00 per bird for layers, depending on the degree of mechanization. Broiler houses and equipment will run approximately $3.50 per square foot. Broilers are usually housed at about 0.8 square feet per bird.

Independent egg farms may be any size. New egg farms usually have 50,000 layers per farm. Broiler farms have 25,000 - 90,000 bird capacity per farm.

Market

Since Florida is now an egg sufficient state, farms must produce eggs for a specific market. They can no longer produce eggs and then hope to sell them for a profit if they have to take a wholesale price for all eggs. In planning for an egg operation, the most important consideration is to have a specific market

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or a firm contract from a contractor. One of the biggest advantages which a farmer has in producing eggs under contract is the freedom from concerns of marketing.

Labor

The most successful poultry operations are those in which the owner and the owner's family are actively involved in managing and working on the farm. Since poultry farming requires some work every day, the manager is responsible for labor seven days per week and must understand the need for this constant attention to details. The most successful poultry farmers enjoy this type of work.

See Table 1 for suggested number of layers per person (8 hrs. per day - 7 days per week) on independent farms, under varying conditions.

COMMERCIAL EGG PRODUCTION

Breeds and Strains Selection

(1) Contract production - The contract egg producer usually has no voice in determining which strain of bird will be placed on the farm. The contractor will select the best bird for egg market.

(2) Independent production - There are several top strains of egg production layers available. The producer should pick the strain to fit the market demand, such as egg size, egg shell color, shell quality and feed efficiency. Chicks should be obtained from reputable hatcheries. By studying the Official Directory of Florida Breeding Flocks and Hatcheries (Published annually by the Florida Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services, Tallahassee, FL) the producer can find a source of quality chicks.

Housing and Equipment

Essentially all commercial layers in Florida are housed in cages. If an egg farm is going to produce eggs under contract, the producer will be able to get construction details from the contractor and often must build and equip the house following the contractor's directions. Since many contractor-owned complexes are built with closed sided, evaporative cooled houses, contract producers may be required to provide similar facilities.

Poultry House Essentials

(a) Locate on well drained land. High, sandy, black jack oak ridges make ideal locations.
(b) Build on an elevated grade with good drainage between houses.
(c) Consider acreage and location of buildings for future expansion.
(d) Open houses should be built with ridge ventilation which can be opened and closed.
(e) If houses are equipped with side curtains, the curtains should be adjustable.
(f) Adequate house eaves (24-36 inches) to keep out blowing rain and direct sun are important.
(g) Consider ease of manure clean out.
(h) Make sure adequate land is available for manure disposal (approximately 1A/1000 birds).

Feeds and Feeding

(1) Feed and feeding instructions are provided by the contractors for farmers producing eggs under contract.
(2) The independent producer should look at economics and buy high quality feed from a company offering good service as well as quality feed. Feeds are composed of important groups of ingredients called nutrients. A high quality feed will contain a proper balance of nutrients balanced for the purpose for which it is to be fed.
(3) Most independent producers should start out buying a complete feed. As he grows in size and gains experience, he may want to consider mixing his own feed. Investigate the economics, time and management necessary to mix a quality feed and maintain quality control. Details in formulation and feed mixing can be obtained from the Extension Poultrymen.
(4) A feeding program should be developed to maintain quality. Check feed tanks for old, caked feed. Empty and clean tanks occasionally. Do not allow feed to get wet.

Flock Health

(1) The contractor serviceperson is trained to spot health problems before they develop into major problems and advise the producer.

Table 1. Suggested Number of Layers Per Person on Independent Farms Under Varying Conditions

	Retailing (Case Lots) when Candling and Cartoning	Retailing Door to Door (Egg Route)
Producer who buys started pullets and whose operation will be placed market, is fully automatic - with pit cleaners, egg gathering belts, etc.	6,000 - 8,000	5,000 - 7,000
Producer who buys started pullets and has automatic feeders	4,000 - 5,000	3,500 - 4,000
Producer who buys started pullets	3,500 - 4,000	3,000 - 3,500
Producer who raises own pullets and is fully automatic with pit cleaners,egg gathering belts, etc.	4,000 - 5,000	3,500 - 4,000
Producer who raises own pullets and has automatic feeders	3,500 - 4,000	3,000 - 3,500
Producer who raises own pullets	3,000 - 3,500	2,500 - 3,000

(2) The independent egg producer can best maintain healthy flocks by:

(a) Using the all-in-all out method of management.
(b) Practicing good management.
(c) Keeping his farm and houses off limits to visitors.
(d) Using a good vaccination program.
(e) Becoming familiar with important diseases and diagnostic lab procedures.

(3) Vaccination:

(a) **Marek's Disease:** 1 day (at Hatchery)
(b) **Bronchitis:** 10 days, 4 to 5 weeks, 14 to 16 weeks
(c) **Newcastle Disease:** 2 weeks repeat every 2 to 3 months
(d) **Fowl Pox:** High Risk Area - 1 to 2 weeks, 12 to 16 weeks; Low Risk Area - 8 to 16 weeks
(e) Vaccination schedules may vary depending on the disease condition in the area.

(4) Diagnostic Laboratories

Five poultry diagnostic laboratories, under the direction of the Florida Dept. of Agriculture and Consumer Services, are located at the following places:

Cottondale Laboratory
P.O. Box 37
Cottondale, FL 32431
(904-353-4461)

Live Oak Laboratory
P.O. Drawer O
Live Oak, FL 32060
(904-362-1216)

Dade City Laboratory
P.O. Box 1031
Dade City, FL 33525
(904-567-5176)

Kissimmee Laboratory
P.O. Box 460
Kissimmee, FL 32641
(305-847-3185)

Miami Springs Laboratory
8701 N.W. 58th St.
Miami, FL 33166
(305-888-8238)

There is a charge of diagnostic service. Birds may be sent to these labs by express or by person. Birds should not be shipped to arrive on weekends. Three or four live birds showing typical symptoms of the condition prevalent in the flock should be sent. The shipment should be accompanied by as much information concerning the flock and sick birds as possible such as: age, duration of illness, previous history of illness and vaccination, size of flock, rate of mortality, medication administration, feed intake, production patterns, etc. All birds submitted as well as containers will be disposed of at the lab.

Brooding

Floor houses

(a) Clean and disinfect houses and equipment completely.
(b) Put in 4 to 6 inches of clean litter.
(c) Have water and feed available when chicks arrive.
(d) Inspect and adjust brooders prior to arrival of chicks.
(e) Follow manufacturer's directions for brooder capacity.
(f) Adjust brooder temperature at edge of hover at 95 degrees F. for the first week and reduce 5 degrees each week.
(g) Use brooder guards for first 7-10 days.
(h) Isolate brooder house and keep visitors out.

Cage Brooder houses

Many poultry farmers are now brooding pullets in cage brooders. Follow manufacturer's directions on heating systems. Use the same management recommendations for preparing house, feeding, watering and chick care.

Pullet Management

(1) Isolate pullet houses and keep visitors out.
(2) Remove unthrifty pullets as they appear.
(3) For feeding and lighting details check with an Extension Poultryman.
(4) Weigh a sample of birds bi-weekly to check body weight against strain standard.
(5) Debeaking - There are several satisfactory methods and programs of debeaking. The poultryman should select the program which fits his operation. The following methods are used:

(a) Early Precision Debeaking
- Age of bird between 6 and 9 days.
- Both beaks inserted into a 10/64 or 11/64 inch hole.
- Hot blade (1700 degrees F) cherry red.
- Hot blade is held against beak for 2.5 seconds.
- When done properly, one debeaking will last for the expected life of the bird.

(b) TT Method
- Age of bird between 8 and 10 weeks.
- Sometimes used in addition to early precision.

(c) Conventional Method
- Age of bird between 12 and 18 weeks.
- Independent block cutting of both beaks.
- Permanent and gives good protection during laying period.

Layer Management

(1) House only well developed, well fleshed pullets.
(2) Use artificial lights to provide 15 hours of total light per day, and start with 1 foot candle intensity at the bird level.
(3) Feed a balanced diet - Keep feed intake records.
(4) Weigh a sample of birds monthly.
(5) Remove obvious culls.
(6) Observe birds often to spot problem areas early.

Egg Handling for Quality

(1) Keep cages and egg gathering equipment in good repair to prevent cracks.
(2) Handle eggs carefully.
(3) Clean dirty eggs using clean, warm (110-120 degrees F) water with a detergent sanitizer.
(4) Cool eggs quickly and keep them cool. Hold at a temperature of 50-60 degrees F. with a relative humidity of 70-80%.

COMMERCIAL BROILER PRODUCTION

All broilers are produced and marketed by firms which own or control hatchery, feed mill, processing plant and market arrangements. Birds are grown by farmers under contract and under supervision of the contractor. The farmer provides land, labor, houses, equipment, taxes, utilities and insurance. The farmer

is paid a base price plus bonus according to the contract.

HATCHING EGG PRODUCTION AND HATCHERY MANAGEMENT

Flock Management

Keep birds healthy, use 10 males per 100 broiler breeder females or 8 males per 100 egg breeder females.

Feed

Feed a breeder diet which is specially formulated for high hatchability.

Care of Hatching Eggs

(1) Select eggs for size, shape, shell color and texture, 23-28 oz. per doz. best for hatching.
(2) Hold eggs at a temperature between 55-65 degrees F., humidity of 70-85% and for not more than 7 to 10 days before setting.