

Poultry Ranks High Among Kentucky's Commodities and Exports

By Cathy Lockman, farmflavor.com, for Kentucky Department of Agriculture. Updated with more current statistics.

As the No. 1 agricultural commodity in Kentucky, the poultry industry is anything but chicken feed. In fact, poultry and eggs are a \$1 billion industry. They account for just over 18 percent of the state's total farm receipts, and poultry is one of Kentucky's top five exports.

It's an industry that has made a large investment in facilities across the state. With five broiler hatcheries, two primary breeder hatcheries, six feed mills, four processing plants, three egg layer complexes and a protein conversion plant, which together employ more than 7,000 people, poultry is big business in Kentucky. And that doesn't even count the impact on individual farmers in the state, both those who own poultry farms as well as those who grow corn and soybeans.

"Every third row of corn in Kentucky goes to growing poultry, as does 30 percent of the beans," says Jamie Guffey of the Kentucky Poultry Federation. That amounts to 36 million bushels of Kentucky corn and 335,000 tons of Kentucky soybeans used as feed.

"We've been growing birds for a long time in the state, but mostly on a small scale," says Guffey. "With the growth of the commercial industry in the state in the last 20 to 25 years, the fact that many local tobacco farmers turned to poultry as a way to diversify their operations, and the emergence of climate control for the poultry houses, we've now become a leader in the industry. We not only produce a safe and wholesome product for Kentucky, but also for the world."

A Bird's-Eye View

The state has nearly 850 poultry farmers, the majority of which are owned and managed by a family farmer and consist of less than five poultry houses. Doug Hall, owner of WP Ranch, is one of those 850 poultry farmers. He is also one of about 175 contract growers who supply birds for Pilgrim's processing plant in Mayfield.

Hall's farm has four poultry houses,

each about 40 feet by 520 feet long and houses approximately 29,000 birds. He explains that Pilgrim's provides the chicks, which are delivered by semi-tractors within a day of hatching, and the feed. Hall and his wife, Dianna Johnson, provide the climate-controlled houses, the water and the labor to care for the birds as they grow in size from 3 ounces when they arrive to nearly 4 pounds when finished.

The process takes about 35 days for those who grow for the Mayfield plant, which supplies chickens for restaurants such as Kentucky Fried Chicken and Chick-fil-A. Hall explains that other markets have other growing specifications depending upon the ultimate use for the chicken.

"When the chicks are delivered, we close off half of the barn because that's the best atmosphere for brooding," Hall says. "As they grow, we open up more of the barn." Hall constantly checks the houses to ensure that the flock is receiving adequate food, water and ventilation. He also monitors the flock for mortality, which he explains is usually less than 2 percent of the flock, and removes those chickens.

When the semi-tractors return for the finished chickens, Hall lowers the lights in the poultry houses while workers hand catch the birds, place them in cages and load the cages back on the trucks for the trip to the processing plant. The Halls spend the next 10 days or so cleaning the poultry houses so that they're ready for the next flock.

Waste Not

Multiply four barns by 29,000 chickens by seven or eight turns per year by the 12 years Hall has been in business, and that equals a lot of chickens – and a lot of waste. In 2010, the Halls decided to turn that waste into compost as a way to add more value to their farm operation.

"Our input expenses continue to go up," says Hall, pointing to the increased costs for water, propane, insurance, taxes and electricity that are necessary in the poultry



growing business. "As we looked for a way to supplement our income, we decided to make use of a product that we had plenty of."

To make the compost, Hall transfers the chicken waste, which contains nitrogen, to a litter barn where he mixes it with wood chips, which provides a carbon source. He ensures that the moisture level of the compost pile is kept up, and he turns it every three days. In six to seven months, the compost is rich with microorganisms, which makes it a great fertilizer. Hall bags it and sells it himself.

In addition to the environmental benefits of recycling the waste product, Halls says it's a creative way to fund his operation. "Rising input costs continue to be a challenge for poultry farmers. The hay I grow and the compost I make are ways for me to improve the bottom line so my business will continue to be successful."

Questions:

1. What is the main idea of this article?
2. Using examples from the article, explain three ways the poultry industry impacts Kentucky's economy.
3. What portion of poultry production is required of the 175 contract growers that provide chickens for the Pilgrim's processing plant?
4. Using context clues, explain the meaning of a 'climate controlled house'.
5. What item is being recycled in large quantities on the Hall farm? Explain the process.
6. After reading this article, think of 5 careers that are directly related to the poultry industry.