USDA NRCS
United States Department of Agriculture
Natural Resources Conservation Service

Pastured Poultry In Alabama

Pastured poultry is a system designed to produce chickens or other poultry products in a floorless pen in pastures. These pens are moved a pen's length each day. Poultry forage on plants and insects within a confined area and their manure adds fertility to the pasture. Also, a supplemental non-medicated feed concentrate is provided each day. There are several methods that can be used for free-ranging poultry animals. This guideline is developed with the primary focus on the Joel Salatin Pastured Poultry Pen Model (see photo of design).

Preparation and Planning

Farmers that plan to implement the above method should make arrangements to purchase or obtain broilers from a commercial source that are capable of yielding a 4-6 pound carcass in approximately 8-10 weeks. In the Joel Salatin Model, Cornish Cross has been used to achieve the desired results.

Birds should be ordered or scheduled to arrive on the farm based upon the desires of the farmer. In most cases, baby chicks arrive at the local post office during the early morning hours. The chicks should be picked up and delivered to the farm. A brooder that conceals the chicks from drafty winds and rain should be available to house the baby chicks for two-weeks. Information listed below further describes the brooding process.

Brooding Chicks

1. An area of at least 5'x5' should be provided for 100 new chicks.
2. This enclosure should have rounded corners to prevent the chicks from piling on each other
3. About six inches of bedding material such as wood shavings should be maintained in each brooder during the entire season (avoid fine sawdust because the chicks may eat it). Bedding should be freshened after each batch of chickens. At the end of each season, approximately one wheel barrow of bedding per unit will need to be disposed of. This can be achieved through compost or use as fertilizer on pasture, etc.
4. Do not use sawdust or shavings from treated lumber.
5. A heat lamp or other heating element will be needed to keep the chicks warm to 90 degrees during the first two or three days. Temperatures can then be gradually reduced by raising the heat lamp. If the chicks are huddled under the lamp, it is too cold. If they are huddled against the walls, it is too hot. If they are moving about feeding and eating, it is okay.
6. Chicks should stay in the brooder 17 to 21 days, depending on the weather.

Feed

1. Non-medicated feed should be used at all times unless there is simply no other alternative.
2. The broiler ration should be 19 percent protein.

Chicks from Brooder to Pasture

After the brooding period, chicks are moved to pastured poultry pens located in livestock pasture. These pens should be constructed and placed in pastures prior to moving chicks from the brooder. The Joel Salatin Model is constructed using

a well braced 10'x12'x2' frame. One-half of the top and sides is covered with 1" mesh poultry wire; the other half of the top and sides is covered with corrugated aluminum. There is a removable door on one-fourth of the top that makes it easy to provide supplemental feed. One-half of the top is covered with a removable heavy duty mesh wire door that allows sunlight to enter the structure (design details at http://www.al.nrcs.usda.gov/about/so_sect/eng/draw.html). For pastured poultry in Alabama, only six pens will be allowed per acre annually during the months of April-November. It is essential to keep the pens covered at all times to protect against predators.

Number of Birds

The Joel Salatin Pastured Poultry Pen Model is designed to hold up to 100 birds. In Alabama, the stocking rate should be 75-90 birds per pen due to hot weather conditions.

Moving the Pens

According to the design, the pens are constructed with a heavy-duty wire handle that has a rubber covering. This handle is used to pull pens forward to a new paddock of grass. To further facilitate the moving of the pens, a farm constructed dolly is placed under the center of the pen at the back. To move the pen, the farmer uses the wire handle and walks forward with the structure. The watering hoses must be disconnected and the feeding troughs removed prior to moving the pens.

Watering System

Many types of waterers can be used in pastured poultry operations. In Alabama, hanging-type waterers (bell-shaped domes) will be used in conjunction with a gravity flow system. This system will contain the following components.

- A garden hose connected to a water supply
- A clean 50-gallon drum serves as the watering tank. Attach the water supply to a livestock float; elevate the drum above the height of the pastured poultry pens. Fill the drum with water until the float cuts off the flow. Insert a small tube in the bottom of the drum. Connect the tube to the bell-waterers to create a gravity-flow system. To control potential algae growth, avoid using clear tubing.

Pens are moved a pen's length each day.

Components are not limited to this system only. If other systems are proposed, NRCS will evaluate the plan and, possibly, adopt the proposed watering system.

Using Pasture Land

Pastured poultry pens work better on pasture land that is flat or gently sloping. Avoid areas with depressions which could allow ponding during rainy periods and cause the chicks to drown. During heavy rain periods, place parts of square bales of hay, or other devices, under the covered portion of the pens to get the chicks out of the water.

Harvesting

After chicks have been allowed to grow for 8-10 weeks, they should reach the desired market weight. At this point, remove the chicks, place them in crates, and deliver them to the processor. Farmers should have a plan to use the excess forage generated as a by-produce of the pasture-fed poultry practice.

Pastured poultry, pioneered by a Virginia landowner, can be developed on Alabama farms. This method, along with innovative marketing, can produce a viable source of income for limited resource and socially disadvantaged farmers.

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