



Field Notes

Practical Results from USDA Sustainable Agriculture Research and Education Projects in the North Central Region

No. 4 Pastured Poultry, Co-op Style

As “natural” meats are becoming more attractive to consumers, producers have an opportune time to market a healthy, homegrown product — such as farm fresh pastured poultry.

Most farmers interested in naturally raised chickens turn to Joel Salatin’s book, *Pastured Poultry Profits: Net \$25,000 in 6 Months*. Nebraska farmer David Bosle did, but he expanded on Salatin’s example by buying and processing birds cooperatively with other Nebraska producers. Bosle’s model mirrors Salatin’s in supporting local economies, clean environments, profitable farms and satisfied poultry consumers. But Bosle’s collective enterprise adds a cost-share twist while meeting a high demand for pastured poultry.

tor Paul Swanson, who helped Bosle acquire a North Central Region SARE grant and get started in pastured poultry. Bosle wanted to establish a profitable system that farmers could use to diversify operations experiencing reduced profits from corn.

Farming irrigated corn and having no livestock experience, Bosle, with four other central Nebraska farmers, bought a portable processing facility on a truck trailer.

“There’s no sense in all of us having this equipment,” said Bosle, who found the used trailer from an Iowa processor.

Bosle compares the processing facility to wheat threshers of the past that traveled from farm to farm in rural communities. He and his co-farmers process May through October,

putting the poultry unit on the road for nearly half a year and slaughtering thousands of chickens on various farms.

The trailer contains killing cones, a scalding, a feather picker, a certified scale and an evisceration area with cooling tanks.

Slaughtering day at Bosle’s farm is frenzied, but professional and organized. He starts out early in the morning preparing equipment. After plucking birds from their Salatin pens and transporting them to the processing unit, Bosle begins by using killing cones — tin cones

in the trailer and secondary plastic cones next to the trailer — to cut the chicken’s main artery, allowing the heart to completely pump out blood.

Next the birds are scalded in a tub on the right side of the trailer.

“This is a key element,” said Bosle of his scalding. “Keeping the water temperature at a

continued, page 2



Nebraska Extension Educator Paul Swanson next to one of David Bosle’s pastured poultry pens.

Team Processing

“The cooperative processing part of this project is very important. Producers involved are able to master their own destiny, otherwise they’re at the mercy of whomever does their slaughtering,” said County Extension Educa-

“The cooperative processing part of this project is very important. Producers involved are able to master their own destinies; otherwise, they’re at the mercy of whomever does their slaughtering.”

-Paul Swanson,
Nebraska
Extension Educator

constant 145-150 degrees makes for very clean plucking.”

Bosle puts scalded birds in the feather plucker, a round tub with spikes on the sides that twirls chicken carcasses with cold water until they’re clean.

Evisceration is done in a small room at the front of Bosle’s trailer. Hired hands follow Salatin’s detailed directions for dressing birds. As chickens are placed in cold water to wash, the helpers discard offal for Bosle to put on a compost pile and later use on his crops.

The final step for whole chicken carcasses is a large, cold water vat, from which customers pick their poultry before 7 p.m. on slaughter day. This same process occurs at each participating farm throughout the growing season.

Bosle said as few as three people are needed on slaughter day to put 200-500 birds through his unit.

Bosle also lets local 4-H clubs use his mobile facility. For 25 cents a bird, young 4-H’ers can process small flocks and sell or freeze their poultry projects.

To make the poultry processing unit a reality, Bosle and friends had a SARE producer grant, along with another cost-share from the Nebraska Sustainable Agriculture Society.

“This project would have been more difficult without the extra money,” Bosle said. “But a group could definitely do it without a grant. You could get

equipment for less than \$10,000. In today’s agriculture, that’s not a big investment.”

Bosle and company also cooperatively buy their chicks and feed, allowing them to purchase at lower cost.

Swanson said growing and marketing pastured poultry takes a variety of skills, and Bosle’s crew illustrates that with more people involved, you have a broader pool of skills. For instance, Swanson said, while Bosle may not have previous livestock experience, he has strong sales skills.



Hired helpers eviscerate and dress birds in the front of the mobile processing unit.

“Working with a group of growers to get started was a real benefit,” said Cris Carusi, executive director of the Nebraska Sustainable Agriculture Society. “Not only did they work together to learn the Salatin system and purchase their

portable processing facility, but they also provided each other with social support as they implemented new practices on their farms. It’s easier to try new things as a group than to try them alone, especially when your neighbors don’t quite understand or accept what you’re doing.”

Simulating Salatin

In most other aspects of Bosle’s pastured poultry operation, he copied Salatin’s successful model.

Bosle raises Cornish cross chickens, starting them in a small brooder house for 3-4 weeks. He uses sawdust to bed chicks, maintaining a 30:1 ratio of carbon to nitrogen to induce composting. Bosle said his later batches of chicks are healthier than earlier batches due to antibodies created by compost.

He uses no sanitizer or disinfectant in the brooder, and birds are not debeaked as they are in confinement operations. Bosle’s mortality rate is negligible. After a round of chicks comes out of the brooder, Bosle composts the waste and applies it to his fields.

Bosle built movable-cage pens, using Salatin’s

specifications, for about \$200 per unit.

“The key factor in building movable cages is to make them light,” Bosle said. “The chickens aren’t going to get out, and you need to be able to move these everyday.”

continued, page 3

Bosle couldn't find feeders to fit his needs, so he had them custom made. He also has a local co-op custom mix his feed that the group buys cooperatively. Free of antibiotics, hormones, coccidiostats, or germicides, the feed contains corn, soybean meal, roasted soybean flakes, kelp, alfalfa meal, fish meal, meat and bone meal, brewers yeast and probiotics ("good bacteria," as Bosle said). Chickens also graze daily on a fresh ration of grass, reducing grain needs by 20 percent.

In movable pens for 3-4 weeks, chickens seem calm and content.

"They've never encountered any of the stress as in confinement systems," Bosle said.

After seven to eight weeks of brooding and grazing, and one day of slaughter and processing, chickens are ready for sale.

Don't be a Chicken

"Probably the biggest challenge for pastured poultry producers is to change their mind set about marketing," Carusi said. "Farmers are used to taking whatever price is offered at the elevator, whether or not it covers their production costs and provides a good wage."

Bosle sells chickens for \$1.65 per pound, netting more than \$2 per bird with 3 ½ to 4 ½ pound carcasses, and he said he will increase prices.

With the comparatively small number of birds he raises, pasturing chickens is "fun money" for Bosle, he said. For one of Bosle's co-producers, pastured poultry teaches children business and farming skills as they do half the work and get half the profit.

"But it does increase your cash flow, especially if you're growing crops," he added. "It's not a get rich quick thing for me, but if you build up to 8 or 10 thousand birds, it definitely can be."

Swanson said those numbers could potentially net the \$25,000 per year that Salatin claims.

[According to Swanson, up to 20,000 chickens per year can be slaughtered per farm in Nebraska without having to be inspected. Check

with your state food inspection officials to learn about on-farm poultry processing laws for your area.]

The ability to profit from pastured poultry comes from adding value and "relationship marketing." But, as Carusi said, marketing is a new frontier for most farmers used to leaving that to someone else. The key is building urban-rural bridges and connecting nonfarm citizens to their food. Bosle tries to do this with a poultry newsletter for customers.

Bosle has an excellent rapport with his 170 customers in three states, some as far as 300 miles away. Some asked for 20 chickens one year and wanted 100 the next. Since healthy, delicious products can sell themselves, Bosle has used only word-of-mouth and local newspapers to advertise.

"There is a huge, untapped market for pastured poultry in Nebraska," Carusi said. "Lots of people remember what farm-raised chicken tastes like, and they jump at the chance to serve that



A Cornish cross hen on the Bosle farm.

kind of quality to their families."

Bosle added, "I'm realizing consumers are also really interested in health and the environment."

Because his birds are free of antibiotics and hormones and less of a stress on natural resources, they are more attractive to consumers than conventionally raised birds. In surveying his customers, Bosle found most of them said there was no comparison in quality between pastured poultry and chicken they bought in stores.

Beyond the producer profits, consumer satisfaction, and environmental benefits, Carusi said pastured poultry can even be a catalyst to push for an entirely different way of growing and purchasing food.

"Buying pastured poultry directly from farmers can be educational for urban consumers," she added. "They learn how they can contribute to healthy, profitable family farms and rural communities." ■

"Probably the biggest challenge for pastured poultry producers is to change their mind set about marketing."

-Cris Carusi,
Executive Director,
Nebraska Sustainable
Agriculture Society

For more information, see page 4

The USDA's Sustainable Agriculture Research and Education (SARE) program supports and promotes economically viable, environmentally sound, socially responsible agricultural systems. We offer competitive grants and educational opportunities for farmers and ranchers, researchers, educators, institutions, nonprofit organizations and others. A national program, SARE has four regional offices. Contact North Central Region SARE at: 13A Activities Bldg., University of Nebraska, Lincoln NE 68583-0840, 402-472-7081, 402-472-0280 (fax), lbauer2@unl.edu, www.sare.org/nrcsare. *Field Notes* shares practical results of NCR SARE projects. Editor: Lisa Bauer, NCR SARE communications specialist. Consultants: Ken Schneider, NCR SARE producer liaison, and project coordinators.

For More Information on Pastured Poultry

Pastured Poultry Profits: Net \$25,000 from 20 Acres — Joel Salatin's popular book on pasture-based poultry production, \$30 (plus \$3.50 postage). Pastured poultry video, \$50 (plus \$3.50 postage). Contact: *The Stockman Grass Farmer*, P.O. Box 2300, Ridgeland, MS 39158, 800-748-9808.

Free-Range Poultry Production, Processing and Marketing — Guidebook developed by SARE producer grant recipient Herman Beck-Chenoweth, \$39.50 (plus \$4.50 shipping). Contact: Back Forty Books, 26328 Locust Grove Road, Creola, OH 45622, 614-596-3079 (fax).

Adding Value for Sustainability — Publication with sections on small-scale processing, food safety, financing, marketing and community support strategies, \$8.50 (plus \$3 shipping). Contact: Joan Padula, Cornell University Farming Alternatives Program, Dept. of Rural Sociology, 17 Warren Hall, Ithaca, NY 14853, 607-255-9832, jmp32@cornell.edu or Kristen Markley, Pennsylvania Assoc. for Sustainable Agriculture, P.O. Box 419, Millheim, PA 16854, 814-349-9856, ksm6@psu.edu.

American Pastured Poultry Producers Association — Publishes quarterly newsletter, networks producers and consumers. Contact: Diane Kaufmann, 5207 70th St., Chippewa Falls, WI 54729, 715-723-2293.

Sustainable Farming Connection — Website with pastured poultry links, including pictures of a mobile poultry processing unit in New York. Go to: metalab.unc.edu/farming-connection and follow the Pastured Poultry link.

NCR SARE — Project reports on pastured poultry grants. Contact: North Central Region SARE, 13A Activities Bldg., University of Nebraska, Lincoln, NE 68583-0840, 402-472-0265, lbauer2@unl.edu.

ATTRA (Appropriate Technology Transfer for Rural Areas) — Ask for *Sustainable Chicken Production* information packet. Contact: ATTRA, P.O. Box 3657, Fayetteville, AR 72702, 501-442-9824 or 800-346-9140, askattra@ncatfyv.uark.edu.

-May 1999

This material is based on work supported by the Cooperative State Research, Education, and Extension Service, U.S. Department of Agriculture, under a variety of Cooperative Agreements. Any opinions, findings, conclusions, or recommendations expressed in this publication are those of author(s) and do not necessarily reflect the view of the U.S. Department of Agriculture. It is the policy of the SARE program and the University of Nebraska not to discriminate on the basis of gender, age, disability, race, color, religion, marital status, veteran's status, national or ethnic origin or sexual orientation. Mention of trade names, corporations, organizations or other entities is not an endorsement of them by the SARE program. This publication is printed on recycled paper.

North Central Region SARE
University of Nebraska
13A Activities Bldg.
Lincoln, NE 68583-0840