

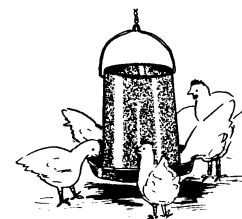


The University of Georgia

Cooperative Extension Service

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BACKYARD FLOCK TIP . . .

NEW OPPORTUNITIES FOR SMALL FLOCK POULTRY PRODUCERS

Modern American agriculture is a model of production efficiency and mechanization. Fertilizers, pesticides and modern genetics help farmers fight disease and ensure a safe and abundant food supply. With this success also comes increased scrutiny and concern over the environmental impacts of large-scale agricultural enterprises. Concerns such as water quality and quantity, soil integrity, food safety, and energy usage are associated with large farming operations. Warranted or not, these concerns attributed to commercial agriculture are giving rise to an increasing section of the consuming public who are looking for alternative avenues for the production of their food, namely organically grown, locally produced, environmentally sustainable products. Small producers that can customize their poultry production and marketing can capitalize on this growing trend. One perception is that birds raised in this manner have less environmental impact than do commercial operations by restricting the use of synthetic fertilizers and pesticides and enhancing local biodiversity. In reality, a kilogram of manure or a liter of ammonia is just that, regardless of its free-range or confined origins. However, providing consumers the option of selecting poultry products from either small or large-scale operations is just another benefit, as well as an opportunity, of the free market system that we have in this country.

Free-range or pasture-fed poultry are terms commonly used with small-scale poultry operations. These birds are typically reared in open lots or portable pens that are moved to a new grass location each day. Fed supplemental feed and fresh water daily, these birds can be produced to meet the demand of local niche markets or internet subscription orders. Producers can charge a premium price, as high as \$6.00 to \$7.00 per pound for some organically produced heirloom breeds, to a small segment of consumers who are willing to pay a premium price for the knowledge that their food was raised in what is perceived to be an environmentally favorable fashion. Birds fed an all-vegetable diet to produce eggs or meat, can also produce premium profits.

Certified organic poultry, perhaps the poster child of alternative niche market products, are required to be raised without the use of antibiotics, fed organically grown feeds, and given access

PUTTING KNOWLEDGE TO WORK

The University of Georgia and Ft. Valley State College, the U.S. Department of Agriculture and counties of the state cooperating.

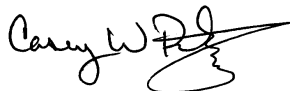
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to the outdoors. Organic poultry products do cost more to produce due to the increased costs associated with restricted availability and lower yields of organically grown feedstocks. Organically grown products are bought and sold with the perception that they are more environmentally friendly than commercially produced products. Consumers that buy organically grown products feel that they are being more environmentally conscious and are willing to pay more for their food than the average consumer. Small producers can capitalize on the organic market trend, particularly if there is a significant local market or through an established internet marketing strategy of pre-order merchandizing.

Consumers may buy organic products because they believe them to be more nutritious than other food. However, current scientific evidence does not support this view. While taste preferences are highly individualized, numerous studies have found no proof that organic food offers greater nutritional values or any distinguishable difference in taste. Eggs may be an exception to the rule. Eggs from barnyard or free-range chickens can have a more intense flavor compared to the conventional supermarket eggs as a result of the consumption of diverse fat sources in their diet (namely insects and greens).

As the demand and popularity for organic or wholistically raised poultry increases, questions on food safety must be addressed. Organic poultry that are raised without antibiotics and in a more natural state are viewed by some consumers as being more safe and healthy to eat. With small poultry operations, the potential for food safety issues and variable product quality are increased compared to integrated poultry production operations where the preparation, storage, and delivery of product to the market is supervised and follows approved standard operating procedures for perishable products. USDA research is being conducted at a number of universities to investigate further claims from organic producers that organic products are safer to consume, by evaluating microbial load of organic products versus those that are commercially produced. While the investigation of the overall safety of organic foods or foods purchased from unregulated vendors continues, the best approach is still “buyer beware”.

Despite overall safety and product consistency questions yet to be answered, small flock poultry producers are enjoying a rapid increase in market opportunities for products that cater to consumers interested in organically grown, naturally reared poultry products. Demand for such products has increased by 20 percent or more each year for the last decade, though the overall market share is still less than 2 percent, according to the USDA. If this trend holds true, small flock poultry producers may continue to find opportunities to expand their markets for the foreseeable future.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Casey Ritz', with a stylized flourish at the end.

Casey Ritz, PhD
Extension Poultry Scientist

Extension County Coordinator/Agent

Your local County Extension Agent is a source of more information on this subject.