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Developing a Free-Range Poultry Enterprise



Zambia Agribusiness Society

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1. Introduction

Poultry refers to birds that are kept by man for economic reasons of obtaining meat, eggs and other products and also for aesthetic or social reasons. The most reared type of poultry is the chicken.

2. Systems of Poultry Production

In poultry production, there are several ways of keeping poultry. The system of poultry production adopted will depend on a number of factors, among them:

1. Finances
2. Knowledge of the poultry business
3. Types of birds
4. Land availability and location of the farm

Traditional Production or Extensive system

This is the most common system. As such, this is the only system we are going to look at. Under this system, we have:

1. Pastured poultry
2. Semi-intensive
3. Yard and crop
4. Innovative
5. Free range

a. Pastured Poultry



Figure 1. Chickens in a field pen

Term used to describe a modification of free-range. A field pen (Fig. 1) is used where the grazing area and bird density are strictly controlled. Birds are pastured in floorless pens and moved daily usually in a rotation following cattle.

b. Semi-Intensive



Figure 2. Chickens roaming about

Refers to permanent housing with access provided to a yard or pasture. Birds in this system should be rotated to different yards, otherwise they will quickly turn a yard into bare soil.

c. Yard and Crop



Figure 3. Chickens roaming the farm

A catch-all term referring to poultry operations that do not include a formal plan for rotating pasture or have no pasture access at all. Birds are allowed to roam the farm at will, shutting them up only at night for protection.

d. Innovative



Figure 4. Chickens in a floorless pen

Birds forage fallow land in a floorless pen which is moved daily. Birds feed on weeds, seeds, and insects, as well as depositing manure on the ground. The field will be rotated to crop production the following season.

e. Free Range



Figure 5. Chickens roaming all over

The free range is the oldest system and has been practiced from the time man began to rear birds. The system allows birds to roam at will all over an almost unlimited area of land where they scavenge for herbage, seeds, insects, e.t.c.

Free range chicken farming is a very profitable business, and many people are making money all over the world by raising free range and backyard chickens. However, to build a successful, sustainable free range poultry farming business, you require sufficient knowledge of how to efficiently raise free range organic chickens, good management skills, and a good poultry farming business plan.

You have to decide on the size of your project i.e. the number of birds you want to keep per cycle; location of the business e.g. a poultry farm, and your target market. These choices will be affected by the amount of capital you have, and the size of your target market. If you do not have a lot of capital, you can always start small and grow your business overtime. You also need to carry out market research (Who are you going to sell the birds to? At what price?) And write a business plan before you venture into the poultry business.

3. What You Need

I. Land, Housing and Equipment

The kind of housing you need and the size of the land will depend on the size of your poultry project. When choosing the location for your poultry business, you have to balance the need for proximity to the market, with the cost of land, labour costs, security, and a good water supply. When you are planning to construct a free range chicken house, you have to select a site which is well-drained with plenty of natural air movement. The right housing should have proper ventilation and the right lighting. Ventilation is necessary so that adequate air exchange can take place. Lighting stimulates hens to lay eggs. If you want to produce eggs year-round, you will need to install adequate lighting in your facility. You should have equipment including feeders, drinkers, lighting system and nest boxes.

Free range chickens and backyard chickens need sufficient space for them to grow well, they should not be crowded, otherwise they may suffocate to death and that will lead to a loss in your business. Each free range chicken requires about 0.1 square meters of floor space which translates to 10 birds per square meter. So the size of the free range chicken house will depend on the number of birds to be reared. Your housing can be barns, chicken runs or hutches, and the cost of construction will depend on the materials used, and the size of the free range poultry house. The free range chickens and backyard chickens also need pasture for them to forage. One of the major difference between [broiler chickens](#) and free range chickens, is that broilers are raised indoors, confined to the broiler house, while free range chickens will spend most of the day outside, foraging the pasture and vegetation.

II. Day Old Chicks

You need day old chicks to start your free range chicken and backyard poultry farming business. After getting experience, you may then hatch your own chicks, which will greatly reduce your expenses as you will no longer need to buy day old chicks. You should purchase your day old chicks from a reliable accredited hatchery or company where the parent stocks are well managed. If you are new to the free range poultry business, you should enquire from other farmers to hear where they buy their chicks from. The success of your free range poultry and backyard chicken business will partly depend on the quality of day old chicks which you buy.



Figure 6. Free range chicks in brooder

4. Chicken Breeds

There are many different breeds of chicken, and the right breed to choose will depend on your needs. You can do a free range chicken business for selling meat, for selling eggs, or for both meat and eggs. The Rhode Island Red chicken breed can be raised for both meat and eggs. They produce about 250 eggs per year. The Light Sussex chicken breed is also a dual purpose breed, for both meat and egg production. White Leghorns breed chickens are usually used as layer birds. They can lay up to 300 eggs a year, each egg weighing a minimum of 55 grams. The Boschveld chicken breed is usually found in Africa, and it can withstand varying climatic conditions. It's also a dual purpose breed, which can be raised for both meat and egg production. There are many other breeds which include Golden Comet, Ameraucana, Barred Plymouth Rock, Golden Laced Wyandottes, Australorp e.t.c.



Figure 7. Free range chickens-Rhode island reds

5. Feed and Nutrition

Feeding is important so as to increase the production of meat and eggs from the free range chickens and backyard chickens. Lack of feed or water will reduce resistance to diseases and parasites, and subsequently increase flock mortality. In a free range poultry rearing system, adult hens and cocks ought to be given enough time and space for scavenging in the surroundings daily. The best time for scavenging is early morning and late afternoon when there are plenty of insects and less heat. Supplementary feeds should be offered in the morning and evening when the free range chickens come back for the night. Clean water should be provided in shady areas during the day to avoid heat stress. You will also need proper vaccines and medications to prevent diseases and promote growth of your free range and backyard chickens.

The advantage of rearing free range chickens is that they will get most of their food from scavenging the surroundings, thus the feed costs are minimized. However, if you are keeping free range chickens for commercial purposes, food from foraging the surroundings is not enough. You will need to supplement their diet with commercial stock feeds, or your own home made feed. You can also give them maize, sorghum, wheat, rice e.t.c.

6. Management and Labour

The number of farm workers you need will depend on the size of your free range and backyard chicken project. If you are running a small business e.g. 100 birds/cycle, you and your family may be enough to take care of the chickens. However, if you are rearing 2000 birds per cycle, you will need full time employees to manage the free range chickens. There is need for good technical knowledge of free range chickens rearing techniques for success in the business. You also need good management skills.

7. Capital

The amount of capital required for a free range poultry farming business depends on the scale of the project. Sources of capital include bank loans, and equity investors. Don't have access to capital? Start small, and grow your business overtime! Free range chickens are very profitable, so if you reinvest the profits you get, you can quickly grow. You will require a good free-range chicken and eggs production business plan to guide you in your business.

8. Market For Free Range Chickens, Meat and Eggs

The market for free range chickens is high and increasing, as more people are moving towards organic and healthier food. Many people prefer organic free range chicken meat, as compared to broiler chicken meat. This is because free range chickens are highly nutritious, delicious, organic, and healthier. Thus, the demand for free range organic chickens meat continues to rise. Free range chickens have a higher price than broiler chickens, as they are considered to be more superior.

The eggs from free range chickens are also considered to be superior as compared to the eggs from commercial indoor layers chickens. Free range chicken eggs are considered to be highly nutritious, delicious, organic, and healthier. Thus, the price of free range organic eggs is higher as compared to the usual poultry eggs. You can supply your free range chicken meat and eggs to individual households, butchers, schools, restaurants, companies, supermarkets, organizations, events, abattoirs etc. You can sell your free range chicken as live birds or you can slaughter and freeze them and sell them as dressed chicken. As you grow your business, you will also be able to export your free range organic products.

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