

## Research Brief #57

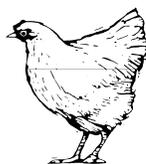
## Raising poultry on pasture

### What's pastured poultry?

A common way to raise pastured poultry involves putting 75 to 100 three- to four-week old meat chickens in movable pens during the growing season. These floorless, 10' by 12' by 2' pens are moved daily by sliding them along the ground, providing fresh pasture. Chickens also receive a grain-based ration. At 8-14 weeks, the chickens are butchered and sold to consumers or restaurants.

### Why pastured poultry?

- Low capital investment
- Can start small and grow
- Strong demand
- Potential for extra farm income
- Can be run by one person
- Kids can help
- Provides sustainably produced meat
- Chickens build soil fertility
- Chickens attract customers for other products



### How much money can I make with pastured poultry?

With a grant from the USDA Sustainable Agriculture Research and Education (SARE) program, CIAS studied five farms (four in Wisconsin and one in Minnesota) using the pastured poultry method described above. The farmers had 3 to 10 years of pastured poultry experience.



Farmers charged an average of \$1.90 per pound for the chickens and sold them from their farm, at farmers' markets, and to restaurants.

Returns to labor and management were collected for four of the farms in 1997 and 1998 (see the table on page 2). The average annual net return *per bird* for all farms was **\$2.43**, with a range that varied greatly from **-\$2.82** to **\$7.05**. The average annual net return *per farm* for all farms was **\$3,580.25**, with a range of **-\$1,609** to **\$11,040**. While farms had similar overhead costs (buildings and land), their feed costs varied. Feed costs and experience level account for some of the variability in returns. The primary goal for the pastured poultry operation—whether monetary or something else (attracting

customers, building soil fertility)—also explains the range.

### How much time does a pastured poultry operation take?



Five participating farmers kept journals to track the amount of time they spent on pastured poultry. Most of their time was spent feeding and watering chickens and moving pens. Average time spent on pastured poultry for 1998 and 1999 was 24 hours per week. One experienced farmer spent only 10 minutes per chicken from chick to processed bird; a less experienced farmer worked over an hour per bird. Family members or paid help provided some labor on most of the farms.

### Is pastured poultry a supplementary or primary farm enterprise?

Based on the on-farm data, researchers developed a model of a 1000-bird supplementary enterprise. This enterprise showed an annual net return to labor and management of just over \$5,000 after five years of operation and building management skills. Labor was estimated at 20 to 22 hours per week over a four-month production schedule. An efficient and experienced pastured poultry farmer could earn \$10-15/hour.

The model of a 5,000-bird operation (a primary enterprise) showed annual net returns to labor and management of over \$18,000 in its tenth year. This would involve a 35 to 42 hour work week



*A farmer checks on his pastured poultry pens.*

over a six-month production schedule. An experienced farmer could earn \$12-18/hour.

## Where can I get birds butchered?

That depends on how many chickens you sell, and where you sell them. To sell across state lines, you must have your birds butchered at a federally inspected plant. There are no such plants in Wisconsin for small batches.



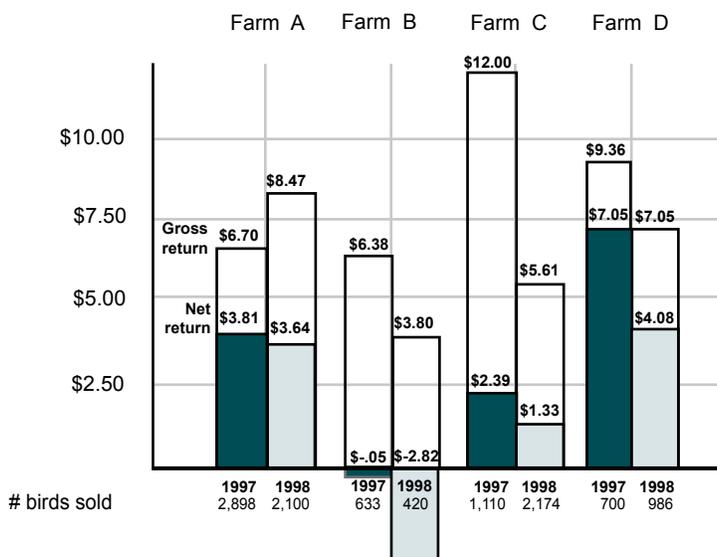
In Wisconsin, to sell more than 1,000 birds per year or to restaurants, you must use a state-inspected plant. There were five of these plants at the beginning of the study in 1997. If you sell no more than 1,000 chickens, you can butcher them at home. Exempt, or uninspected, poultry plants can also butcher no more than 1,000 birds for sale or home use. In 2001, there were 11 of these plants in Wisconsin; in 2008 there are 15. Birds processed at home or at an exempt plant must be labelled “not inspected, exempt 97.42” with the name and address of the producer. You can sell live chickens to customers, but these birds cannot be butchered on your farm. The buyer has to take the chickens home to butcher them. Farmers in the study paid \$2.75 per bird for processing at state-inspected plants; costs have increased since 2001. For a current list of state inspected and exempt poultry processors in Wisconsin, visit <http://www.datcp.state.wi.us/fs/business/food/plants/index.jsp> or call 608-224-4700 and order the meat establishment directory.

## What other factors should I consider before raising pastured poultry?

Pastured poultry can be a good supplementary enterprise on a diversified farm, especially for farmers already direct marketing other products. If not already selling farm products, a farmer will need to build a customer base. Even at a small scale, the operator is tied down by the need to feed and water the chickens and move cages.

In a 1999 survey on the study farms, 83 percent of the customers felt the pastured chickens tasted better. But University taste and nutritional tests did not detect any differences between pastured poultry and conventionally raised poultry. Since

## Annual gross and net returns per bird from pastured poultry, 1997 and 1998, four farms



these farmers are raising the same breeds of chickens as the conventional system, there may be a limit to how much the pasture can influence nutrition and flavor. Farmers report that finding a breed of chicken that is both appealing to customers and good at foraging is a challenge.

The farmers in the study felt the biggest obstacle to making pastured poultry work is the processing—both the availability of licensed processors and the quality of the processing. There may be reason for optimism on the processing front: researchers found that an on-farm processor in Minnesota was just as clean as a USDA plant. And it may be possible to raise the Wisconsin on-farm processing limit—Illinois raised its limit to 5,000 birds in 1999.

## Where can I get more information?

For more information on the CIAS pastured poultry study, contact:

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**For more information** on pastured poultry, contact the American Pastured Poultry Producers Association at PO Box 87, Boyd, WI 54726, e-mail [grit@apppa.org](mailto:grit@apppa.org), or visit <http://www.apppa.org/>

*The Center for Integrated Agricultural Systems (CIAS) brings together university faculty, farmers, policy makers, and others to study relationships between farming practices, farm profitability, the environment, and rural vitality. Located at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, it fosters multidisciplinary inquiry and supports a range of research, curriculum development, and program development projects. For more information on the Center or on the research in this Brief, contact:*

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