

Managing Change Over of Hens Episode 3

Transcription:

Daniel: Daniel OBrien here. Welcome back to greengrassseggfarming.com. Today we are speaking with a special guest, Marnie Ellis again and we're talking about managing change over of birds. Welcome today Marnie.

Marnie: Thank you for having me back.

Daniel: It's good to have you back. So, changing over of birds, interesting topic, obviously when we first start an egg farm we buy some hens, they're not going to lay for the next decade, obviously they're going to get to a stage where they need to retire and we get some new birds in. So tell us how do we do this smoothly, or what are some things to do and not to do.

Marnie: Ok, for us we run an ISA brown bird and so we run on a 12 month lay cycle. We get birds in say, I'll use a month for example, in April. April 2015 we have birds coming at 17 weeks of age. We would then have them lay for 12 months so they wouldn't start laying until May and we would allow them to lay eggs to the following May. What we would do though before they drop off in their egg production and they wouldn't drop off completely but they will drop off a little bit, we would actually introduce another flock of birds about a month to six weeks before that first flock is due to drop lay and in that way we have a consistency of egg sizes and a consistency of egg numbers. That sounds like a bit of a logistical nightmare but there is a bit of method to the madness.

Daniel: Ok, so I suppose the question that probably comes to a lot of people's minds is, so you've actually got two flocks at the moment, you've got your older flock that's just about to finish and you've got your new flock that's already arrived. So talk us through the logistics of how we actually pull this off?

Marnie: Ok, well this is one of those lessons 101, don't do what we did if it affects you! Just to put it into perspective, when we first started we only had small numbers of birds but we got up to around 250 to 300 birds and had all those eggs sold and then we realised that pretty soon those birds were going to drop a little in their lay rate as they come around to their first year moult. All of a sudden it was evident that we would not have enough eggs to keep up with supply. We went into panic mode and all of a sudden that was the first time I had realised, that at any one time that if I wanted to run one flock of birds, if I wanted to keep the consistency up I actually needed a second shed in order to start the second flock before the first flock dropped off.

There's a number of reasons for that. One is the consistency of the continued supply, so for some people one flock may work, they're happy to let them drop off and they only supply to customers when they have available eggs, realising that birds are seasonal producers and that they run with that. But once people start supplying restaurants and retail outlets specifically restaurants, it's really hard when they've got onto a good thing, they're getting your eggs, they love your eggs and all of a sudden you say, "Actually we're not going to have any for the next six weeks". Trust me, they don't like that, doesn't go down very well, so it's really important if people are going to have a supply where they're supplying retail outlets, restaurants and cafes that they do have new birds coming in as the old birds are dropping out, and it's a simple thing to do once you get your head around it but for a lot of people it means ordering birds and ordering sheds, for example for us we have to order 12 months in advance. That's probably the hardest thing.

Daniel: So the main way to get around it, cause I get asked this question often, is to have two flocks. You've always got, one of the flocks you might be changing over, the other flock is still laying.

Marnie: Yes and for people who want to run more birds, we run year round 1200 to 1600 birds here in four different flocks. We in effect have three flocks most of the time but there's always a fourth one coming in or going out and that allows us to have 1200 birds in lay, all year round.

Daniel: Yeah ok, so your calendar, how you do your four flocks, do you do them all in one? Obviously you don't want to change them over all in one month cause that's what we're talking about cause you going to get rid of all 1200 to get 1200 in. So you've got four flocks, how do you stagger them so you've got consistency of eggs.

Marnie: We have one flock come in every three months during the year. So it will be January, then it will be three months later, three months after that, three months after that. There would be one flock coming in January then the oldest flock would be sold off in February and another flock comes in April and then in May the oldest flock is sold out, so like I said there's always 1200 laying at anyone time but for us with the three flocks all year round but a fourth shed, this is what we call the change over shed. Birds come in to it and birds go out of it.

Daniel: So basically every 12 weeks you're getting rid of old birds and then a short time after that, when that shed's all washed and cleaned out, you've got new birds coming in to it. I think you run a very good system because once you get to four flocks, some people will say, "Oh, it sounds like a lot more hard work cause wouldn't it be better off putting them in one flock." But your consistency of eggs, with 75% of your total hens are laying, and the other 25% either just starting or just finishing. So you've got that consistency all year round and as you said restaurants want that, they don't want to reprint a menu cause you can't supply next week.

Marnie: Yeah absolutely, that's correct and the other thing with having big flocks and I've seen it done and it works for some people perfectly, is, they might run 2000 birds year round but only run two sheds and the biggest thing I see with the big number of birds and a big shed, is that all of a sudden you've got a thousand to get rid off. That's a lot of birds to get rid off, especially if you're selling them off to backyarders as we do. So when we're selling them off we've only got 400 to 450 at any one time and that's manageable. If you've got a thousand you've got to be very close to a local market to ensure that you can offload those birds or look for other alternatives to offload those birds so that's the first thing. But the second thing is, with big number of birds in two flocks, actually you'll run the risk of having all really big eggs or all pullet eggs or all smaller eggs.

Because of the way that our market works where we have a really diverse range of where our eggs go, some people, some places, like the pullet eggs, some places like the 600 gram eggs but then I have restaurants who like the really big eggs and then I've got my customers who buy at the gate who like the jumbo eggs. We only get that variation because we run different age flocks whereas if we ran one or two flocks that were really big numbers of birds, or, say we run three vans and they all have birds in them so you have 1500 birds or just short of 1500 birds and then you just sold off those birds and bought in new ones all of a sudden you're going to have 1500 birds with the pullet eggs, very small eggs coming at you and then at the other end you're going to have a hundred percent of all very big eggs. So that was something that wasn't really evident to us until we'd run for probably 18 months to 2 years and we realized that we needed those different sizes to get by.

Daniel: So there you go, you've just given away two years worth of learning, someone will get that tip up front.

Marnie: I'd say don't take it lightly cause it was a very big learning curve and it was a very stressful time I'll let you know that. I had to go and tell the restaurants "You know what, these birds have dropped off their lay, I didn't know that was going to happen, didn't know how quick it's going to happen. Now I don't have eggs for you for another 8 – 10 weeks" and they've reacted like "Huh? Really?" Those days were stressful. It doesn't sound stressful but it was stressful, because we had just developed relationship with these guys, working relationships, and they were great about it but it does take a lot of educating. If you are going to run that way where you don't have a change-over flock coming in and an old one going out you do need to educate your customers that it's going to be a seasonal supply and there's going to be times when you can't supply.

Daniel: Big numbers flooding the market when you're getting rid of hens. Tell me the process, you've mentioned just selling them to people that use them for their backyard, how do you go about that?

Marnie: It's called chicken drive through. We have developed a system whereby I advertise generally on Facebook or through previous lists of people that have purchased from us before. We let them know that there's birds available for pick up on specific nights and it's always in the dark so in summer sometimes that time is 9:30pm. In winter it's

generally 7 o'clock so no one has access to our place until those times and they literally drive in, like the drive-through at the chicken shop, and one at a time they drive up to the fence. Generally one of the kids is ticking off names and taking money and Shane and I are collecting hens out of the shed to place in their boxes or their crates. We can offload about 200 birds every hour, so in two nights all the birds are generally gone. When we started it used to be that someone would ring and they want two so I'd meet them at the farm at 2 o'clock the following day and chase the birds around to try and catch two of them in the middle of the day. That was quite stressful on the birds, it was extremely stressful on me and I'm sure I looked like an idiot as well.

Daniel: Maybe they just did that for the entertainment!

Marnie: They might have been saying, "Hey kids come and watch this".

Daniel: This will be fun, let's buy two chickens from this lady.

Marnie: Yeah, and they watched me chase them around in a flock of 400 in a couple of hectares. Whereas now, again it's an education thing. People will be like "What? it'll be dark! I've got to put my kids to bed!" I tell them "That's ok if you've got someone else that can come out and pick them out for you". It's heaps less stressful on the chickens if they can be picked up straight off their perches cause the thing is, in the dark – for people who don't realise that – once the chooks have perched they don't really move, they're really quiet.

We walk into their sheds and there'll be sheds of 400 to 450 and we walk straight to their perches and collect them like we're just taking something off the supermarket shelf. It's a really simple process, less stressful on them, less stressful on Shane and myself and the boys, but also when they go back to their new enclosures at their new homes or their new backyard homes, they can be put on the perch in their new place and wake up in the morning and hop off the perch in the morning to lay their egg in their new home and haven't been stressed and haven't been chased by the cat during the day and all that sort of stuff. I think that makes a big difference to the chooks but definitely makes a difference to me.

Daniel: Yeah, I really think you've got an amazing system for getting rid of hens and I know we've talked about that in the past. So, you tell people all the one time, its after dark, obviously you'll tell them to bring their own cage or box to put the hens in, and obviously the right money because you're not going to take a credit card.

Marnie: Yes, I don't have an ATM in the paddock, I have had to make that known.

Daniel: Yeah, and I think if you give them clear instructions it makes it easy for everyone. I do like that you find out when it's dark and a bit after dark they all turn up at this time, tell you how many hens you want, have a box, have a cage, have the right money. Do you get a list before they come, to say Frank wants five, this person wants so many.

Marnie: Yes absolutely, it's all by preorder only, nobody can just rock up on the night and generally if somebody did rock up they'd miss out because everything is generally as a rule sold prior to those two days. People either text or call me and a list is started and then it's compiled, of who wants what, who's picking up for who and all that sort of thing. So as then when we load out it's pretty easy for the kids. We mainly developed that system so as both the boys could be involved and it's easy enough then for one of them to sit there, tick off a name, take some money, that's a good way to learn their times table, we worked out.

The beauty of it too, it's really one we've only thought about the last couple of months is, realistically we could be unloading birds today, for argument's sake – we're not but we could be – unloading birds today and tomorrow, I could clean out the shed on Saturday and we could put new birds in there on Sunday or Monday. So our turnaround for making any of our sheds is making it work for us, it doesn't have to be empty for 10 or 12 weeks, we can actually empty it and replenish it again within three or four days. It really only needs two days to empty, one day to clean, one day to dry in the sun and then birds can arrive the following day.

Daniel: At the end of the year, that means a lot when you'll get cash flow rather than having to get rid of them three weeks beforehand and then, cause they're still laying when you get rid of them, not having any of those eggs.

Marnie: Yeah, that's the thing too and I probably haven't made that clear is, these birds are all still laying, so in the first year we might get anywhere up to 90 to 93 percent lay rate across the board of one age group of birds and in the second year that lay rate across the board can drop off to as low as 70 to 75 percent. Now in a backyard if you look at it, if someone has 10 hens in their backyard and they're getting seven eggs a day, they'll be ecstatic. If I'm getting five eggs a day or 50 percent they'll be stoked. But in a commercial sense I can't have a thousand birds and only 500 of them are laying. I'd be really questioning the return of my investment and cash flow and all those sorts of things, whereas if we can keep it closer it to a thousand birds and 900 birds laying daily, we going to be more on the mark and that's what I think people, and people I've spoken to in the past, haven't considered. I know we definitely didn't consider any of that stuff when we started, I just thought, we'll sell them off. As you know I then keep coming back saying "I need another shed, I need another shed" because it became evident that I couldn't just cut my customers off and say I'll come back to you in 12 weeks time.

Daniel: So when you say, you sell these hens, really the hens don't owe you any money, they've paid for themselves throughout the year. What if someone is selling hens. What are they looking at getting for them cause they don't need to get a particular figure to pay for themselves, really they're doing you a service to take them away for you.

Marnie: Yes, absolutely. Here locally, depending on the age of the birds. Sometimes we've got birds going out a little bit older or a little bit younger than that 18 month mark or a little bit less than 12 months or a little bit more. It just depends on

when I've got birds coming in. In here, I don't know with the other farms around here, but anywhere from five dollars to eight dollars a bird is what they getting. People are happy to pay that, one because the birds from us are fully beaked, fully vaccinated, they've had fantastic lives. Yes, they might be missing a few tail feathers which is normal because they're about to go into a moult or maybe coming out the other side of the moult. Again it's an education thing, educate people on those things and most, I would say 30 to 40 percent of the people that come back to buy our spent hens, are people who have purchased them in the years previous. They just look at it that they're happy to pay anywhere from five to eight dollars depending on their age, to then have those birds and give them another 12 to 18 months of a great life in their backyard and then when they've finished for them and they're no longer required or they might have gone to hen heaven, they then come back and replenish their home stocks from our stocks here.

Daniel: Tell me, I'm sure someone is thinking about this now, "Hang on, you've got an egg farm and you're selling eggs to the market, if you sell all these hens off wouldn't you be shooting yourself in the foot".

Marnie: We are hoping that it might make a difference and not have to be chasing our tail all the time for eggs. Honestly it does not make, or it has not made, one ounce of difference. Just doing the quick maths here right now, probably since we started we've offloaded around 7000 birds, probably more, probably 7500 birds, into our immediate local area and to date I haven't noticed one change at all.

Daniel: Yeah and you've still got people on the waiting list to get your eggs.

Marnie: Yes. And to get birds.

Daniel: Hard to believe but true, it's just how it is. The other thing that people need to understand, the people that are buying your eggs every single week at a retail shop, or they are coming to the farmers market, these are probably different people than those buying hens from you, every 12 weeks or once a year or something. It's another market. One thing that you said, you can advertise it on Facebook but also you have a list of your old customers, anyone that you sold hens to. That there is a very good point. If you've already sold two or three flocks to people and you've got a list, it's quite easy to, in your case, do you email them?

Marnie: Mostly through text, through the text service. I think there's only two customers on the list that don't have a mobile phone that I actually call directly. Everyone else receives a text message.

Daniel: That's just great and if they don't want hens they're certainly going to tell their friends to go "Oh, Marnie's got some hens available, are you after some?"

Marnie: Yep, somebody once told me that the list of your customers was extremely important and at that time I was probably thinking more about the list of our egg

customers, who we supply our eggs to. The list of anybody that I have contact with regarding any aspect of our business whether it be for workshops, for spent hens, for our egg customers, for open days. All those lists are different and all those lists are as important.

Daniel: We'll just do a little bit of a recap. When you're managing change over of birds, if you have one flock you can do it, but there will be a time that it's completely going to go off the lay cause you need to get rid of that flock, get a new flock in that hasn't started laying yet and start again. If you're going to do that, you're going to need to communicate that with your customers and restaurants may not be a good market for you cause they're going to want consistent supply.

Marnie: Absolutely yeah, if that's the way people would like to go and they want to do it, I'd suggest looking at a direct market because at least you can then have the ability to stop/start because they can be flexible in your market. Your direct customers can buy eggs elsewhere as can your restaurants but it's more about like I said earlier, about the change on their menus and those sorts of things.

Daniel: Yeah, so you keep your hens for 12 months of lay so when they arrive at 16 to 17 weeks, when they start laying, 12 months after that, that's when you want to look getting rid of them. We talked about, as a hen gets older, it'll lay bigger eggs than at first when it starts to lay the eggs were pullet eggs, smaller, and then gradually over time if we've got more than one flock, we can have a consistency with size of eggs and consistency is very good.

The other thing you covered, if you've got big numbers of let's say a thousand birds at a time you can effectively flood the market when you getting rid of old hens because you got to get rid of a thousand hens and you're probably not going to do that in two nights but in your case you're getting rid of 400 hens over two evenings. So smaller flocks or maybe 400 or 450, if you have four of them you going to have consistency of eggs, consistency of getting rid of those hens and also keep a list of the customers because they're likely to come back and buy more. When they do come and buy make sure it's at night so you're not running around chasing chickens looking a little bit crazy in your paddock. Ok is there anything else that we need to cover?

Marnie: That's all I've come up with today.

Daniel: I hope this has been valuable for everyone, managing change over of birds with Marnie Ellis from Gippsland Free Range. Well, thank you for your time yet again. I'm sure everyone would have got a lot of value from this.