

Poultry: An Ag EMS Case Study

T.O.P. Farm

Vann & Tabatha Wooten,
Snipesville, Georgia

“The EMS policies and procedures mean we don’t run around everyday giving employees their list of work to do... everybody knows the policies and procedures and what to do on a daily basis. If there is an accident or emergency they are prepared and know the plan of action to take in a particular situation.”

-Tabatha Wooten

The Operation

Vann and Tabatha Wooten have a diversified farm. They grow broilers under contract in 10 houses, run a 120 cow-calf enterprise, cultivate about some 1,200 acres of corn, soybean, peanuts, rye, wheat, and hay, and manage their woodlot for timber. These enterprises require six full-time employees, in addition to Tabatha’s accounting work and Vann’s operational management.

Why an Ag Environmental Management System?

A coach spent three days with the Wootens setting up their EMS. Tabatha Wooten reports that she immediately sensed the potential of written policies and procedures to help transform their “50 fires to be put out” pattern into an efficient management style. “We have implemented some policies and procedures in almost all areas of our operation and that has helped our employees to understand and be on the same page with Vann and know what is going on. Everyone is informed,” she says.

Another important contribution of the EMS to the Wooten farm is making it a safer place for employees, suppliers, and visitors. For example, chemical storage is better organized. “When someone delivers a chemical they know where to put it, instead of just dropping it off at the door of the shop for anyone to trip over or spill,” Tabatha Wooten reports.

Specifically, T.O.P. Farms is committed to:

- compliance with applicable environmental laws and regulations,



T.O.P. Farms Environmental Policy

T.O.P. Farms is a diversified family-owned operation with poultry, cow/calf and a variety of row crop production located in Jeff Davis County, GA.

T.O.P. Farms considers being a good neighbor and responsible community citizen a high priority and actively participates in local industry, civic and church activities.

T.O.P. Farms produces the best products in an environmentally responsible manner by utilizing the best available practices, materials, equipment and technologies.

- proactive management of animal and crop health,
- efficient management of nutrients within the cropping system,
- enhancing and protecting wildlife habitats, and
- periodic reviews of our operation and associated environmental risks to identify improvement opportunities.

Changes for the Better with an AgEMS

- Planning for environmental improvements is now systematic, including construction of litter compost storage and fencing to control grazing near ponds.
- Employees are more productive as a result of written procedures for many of their tasks.
- Standard policies and procedures have eliminated safety hazards.

Ag EMS Sector Summary: Poultry

Background

American poultry production is one of the most vertically integrated businesses in agriculture. The industry structure, especially in broiler production, is based on the integrator/contract grower model. Contract growers commonly operate two to ten houses, each house holding 20,000–28,000 birds, with grow-outs every six to eight weeks delivered to integrator-processing facilities. Layer and turkey production involves more independent operations than broilers, but many of those operations still exceed 100,000 birds per farm.

As with pork production, this has resulted in environmental challenges with production of larger volumes of manure in much smaller areas. The potential for Environmental Management Systems (EMSs) to improve the environmental performance of poultry operations was tested in Georgia, Virginia, and Pennsylvania. In Virginia and Pennsylvania, project members worked with broiler, layer and turkey producers, Georgia worked with broiler producers with dry waste management systems.

Challenges

Farmers in all three states were aware of a need to document their practices and stewardship efforts. Compared to other livestock sectors, however, a much larger percentage of contract poultry farmers are part time growers pursuing other agricultural enterprises or off-farm income. For these farmers the time, record keeping requirements, and resources needed to produce an EMS were considerable impediments. In addition, the integrators mandate many management decisions and control most major inputs including: chicks, feed, animal health care, flock collection and transportation to processing facilities. In addition, uncertainty about changing regulations and a lack of consistency in educational and technical assistance challenged farmers to see how the EMS framework might meet their goals.

Possibilities with Processors

In contrast, many poultry processing facilities are pursuing the development of EMSs. This is driven by export market demands and the NPDES permitting system. Expansion of the EMS approach from processing facilities to the farms is a logical extension if the proper tools and policies are in place to allow processors to support their producers to adopt EMSs.

Summary

Growers in all three states felt that functional EMSs would benefit their operation but that their ability to develop and implement EMSs without incentives and assistance was questionable. Multi-farm or integrator-sponsored workshops may be an effective vehicle for EMS implementation. Integrator-supported field staff often provides assistance to poultry growers on issues such as bird health, ventilation, and other management issues, and may provide an ideal delivery mechanism for EMS related coaching. Improved tools, better incentives, and one-on-one technical assistance will be required to encourage producer participation. If these barriers can be overcome, environmental benefits and improved management may be realized through EMS adoption.

Broilers and meat-type chickens

	1982	1987	1992	1997	2002
Georgia	521	609	749	1,017	1,288
Pennsylvania	104	106	108	118	132
Virginia	120	143	202	259	266

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