



Considerations in Raising Small Backyard Flocks of Poultry in Population-dense Communities

David D. Frame, DVM, Diplomate ACPV
Extension Poultry Specialist

During these times of economic challenge many people are considering raising a few chickens in the backyard to augment their food supply. This has raised numerous questions ranging from how to feed chickens to addressing local animal-keeping ordinances. Often, the answers are a work in progress for many communities. The following considerations should be taken into account.

Science-based Education Is Critical

Be cautious of advice from self-proclaimed "experts" or people with informal training who attempt to fill a perceived educational niche. Many would-be poultry raisers are novices or first time owners. Learning how to do things correctly from qualified science-based sources is paramount in order to be successful. Optimal decision-making must be based on facts – not hearsay or folktales. Utah State University Cooperative Extension offers research-based education in small flock poultry raising. County agents and an Extension poultry specialist are available to educate groups and community leaders in poultry health and management issues. Fact sheets are also available on line:

http://extension.usu.edu/files/publications/publication/AG_Poultry_2008-01pr.pdf

http://extension.usu.edu/files/publications/publication/AG_Poultry_2008-02pr.pdf

http://extension.usu.edu/files/publications/publication/AG_Poultry_Health_Biosecurity_01.pdf

Effects on the Economy

The commercial poultry industry contributes a significant and vital part to the agricultural economy of the U.S. Anything that jeopardizes the viability of this industry also jeopardizes the economic health of Utah. It is important that these commercial flocks be protected from serious diseases that would decimate this sector of Utah's economy. An upsurge in number of small backyard flocks, particularly if not properly managed, might significantly increase the probability of disease exposure to the commercial industry. Past history has shown that diseases such as exotic Newcastle disease (END) can become present in the small flock poultry community. Exotic Newcastle disease can cause tremendous poultry death in both the small backyard flocks and in large commercial poultry operations. The discovery of END, for example, will have devastating economic consequences from death loss as well as the loss of trade with other countries.

Community Impacts

The local community may experience unanticipated impacts from an abrupt unregulated increase in backyard poultry keeping. Any potential undesirable repercussions can be minimized through recognition and well thought out planning to ensure that all remain good neighbors.

Noise: Hens are quieter than roosters. There are no practical or humane methods to “de-crow” a male fowl. It takes experience and knowledge to properly identify the gender of young chicks. Your local farm implement store may not be able to provide this service reliably when chicks are purchased. Be prepared to cull roosters as the chicks mature. Hens do not need a rooster present in order to lay eggs.

Mixing of species. It is extremely risky to raise multiple species of poultry and waterfowl on the same premises – particularly if there is chance of exposure to wild birds. This is how many deadly poultry diseases get started, such as END or avian influenza (“bird flu”).

Zoning. Some municipalities do not allow the raising of poultry or have strict ordinances that restrict this activity. Check with your city or county office to determine if there are specific regulations or restrictions that might preclude keeping poultry on your property. Along with city or county ordinances, some communities or subdivisions have rules or “covenants” that restrict the raising of poultry. Be sure to check if your domicile is in one of these.

Animal control. Chickens are no respecters of property lines. They are prone to wander at will into neighbors’ yards and gardens. Remember chickens can also fly. To minimize the impact on neighbors, enclosures should be considered that properly restrain poultry and confine them to your property.

Animal waste. In many instances, used chicken litter can be incorporated into the garden soil or composted; however, improper composting or storage may create excessive odor and fly problems. Proper composting requires careful management of moisture, aeration, and temperature. Allowing chickens to superficially scratch through a pile of manure is not sufficient for optimal composting to occur for a number of reasons. There are many Extension publications from various universities addressing the issue of general composting techniques. These should be thoroughly perused during any decision-making process.

Disposal of deceased and spent fowl. It is important to realize that chickens have a relatively short life span. The productive life of a hen is about three to five years. Baby chicks soon grow up to be adult chickens and adult chickens end up as old chickens. Community leaders need to seriously address the issue of bird disposal. Do local ordinances allow birds to be

buried on the premises or composted on-site or taken to the landfill?

Human health. Although in most circumstances chickens pose a relatively low risk of giving disease to humans, there are a few that can be transmitted back and forth. Proper care and handling of eggs and processing of poultry carcasses are critical to avoid problems. Appropriate disposal of dead birds and used litter are also important.

Mice thrive in areas where chicken feed is improperly stored and excessive spillage occurs. Rats could become a problem in excessively wet areas or where water leaks occur. Feed should never be sprinkled into the litter or floor of poultry houses. This only encourages rodents to hang around the coops. Feed is to be properly dispensed in hanging hoppers that limit access to marauding rodents. Also, unused feed should be stored in closed containers in a cool area. A rodent control program of bait feeding and/or trapping should be mandatory in addition to all other precautions.

Animal Welfare

Proper care and feeding. It is imperative that poultry owners learn and implement proper care of their birds. Inhumane practices such as denying poultry access to water or a protected coop during hot days or during inclement and cold weather are intolerable. Many would-be poultry owners may never have raised chickens or farm animals before. They may not realize what the proper care and feeding of poultry entails. Birds are to be provided with a proper diet at all times and not left to fend for themselves. Enough space must be provided to adequately accommodate the number of birds kept. This is where appropriate science-based education becomes indispensable.

Enforcement of noncompliance. If some type of local poultry permitting program is practiced, will there be sufficient funds and personnel to carry out the program? Does the community have the adequate resources and personnel to deal with people who break the rules or handle poultry in cruel or inhumane ways?

Protection from predators and disease. Chickens are to be enclosed in a coop at night to protect them from predators. Although the debate could go on *ad infinitum* as to what the optimal construction should be, common sense is usually adequate. Doors should tightly close, glass or strong plastic windows should be used, and a solid floor should be in place. Periodic

inspection around the coop will indicate if varmints are trying to enter. Then take care of the varmint problem.

Outside runs need to be covered with good quality wire or roofing that will keep out wild birds and keep the chickens inside. Many people might find this a serious inconvenience, but it is imperative! Wild birds can carry diseases that could kill their birds or set up a reservoir of infection that could get into the area's commercial poultry industry with devastating consequences. This is a risk that any responsible community governing body should not take. The satisfactory demonstration of properly enclosed and restrained chickens should be a mandatory requirement in any permitting process.

Disease transmission. Chicks must be purchased from sources certifying that they are free from specific diseases. Certain species of poultry can carry

organisms that may do little harm to them but could cause devastating disease in another species. Mixing of species, such as ducks and chickens or chickens and turkeys increases the potential infection and spread of avian influenza (bird flu). Raising chickens and turkeys together could cause devastating disease in the turkeys. It is important to understand the nature of poultry diseases and how to deal with them. Contact your local veterinarian or Extension poultry specialist for further information on disease transmission and optimal biosecurity practices.

Visit these Web sites for other important information:

http://extension.usu.edu/files/publications/factsheet/AG_poultry_2005-01.pdf

http://www.aphis.usda.gov/animal_health/birdbiosecurity/

<http://ag.utah.gov/divisions/animal/health/index.html#avianHealth>

Utah State University is committed to providing an environment free from harassment and other forms of illegal discrimination based on race, color, religion, sex, national origin, age (40 and older), disability, and veteran's status. USU's policy also prohibits discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation in employment and academic related practices and decisions.

Utah State University employees and students cannot, because of race, color, religion, sex, national origin, age, disability, or veteran's status, refuse to hire; discharge; promote; demote; terminate; discriminate in compensation; or discriminate regarding terms, privileges, or conditions of employment, against any person otherwise qualified. Employees and students also cannot discriminate in the classroom, residence halls, or in on/off campus, USU-sponsored events and activities.

This publication is issued in furtherance of Cooperative Extension work, acts of May 8 and June 30, 1914, in cooperation with the U.S. Department of Agriculture, Noelle E. Cockett, Vice President for Extension and Agriculture, Utah State University.