

Good as gold

Producers willing to meet 'cage-free' requirements find a market ready and willing to pay a premium for their eggs.

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In a vast cage-free henhouse at Dorothy Farms in Winthrop, birds are able to roam. Wood roosts and scratch pads made from artificial turf simulate barnyard conditions.

WINTHROP - Longer than a football field, the henhouse floor at Dorothy Egg Farms is a moving, brown carpet of chickens. A crescendo of clucking greets visitors who wade into this pulsating mass of poultry, 20,000 young laying hens brought here three weeks ago for a pilot project that could give a boost to Maine's sagging egg industry.

In a joint venture with Dorothy Egg Farms, Radlo Foods LLC of Watertown, Mass., spent hundreds of thousands of dollars to rip out wire cages that once housed more than 80,000 birds. It's the first large-scale conversion of a conventional henhouse in Maine, and perhaps the country, according to Radlo Foods.

Behind the investment is a changing marketplace: Many New England shoppers are willing to pay twice as much for brown eggs laid by "cage-free" chickens.

Chickens that aren't confined enjoy better living conditions than birds stacked in cages, according to animal advocates who have developed a humane certification program. Consumer demand for these certified eggs is growing so quickly that Radlo and Dorothy plan to convert a second conventional chicken house here to one where hens can wander.

Cage free remains a tiny slice of Maine's \$61 million a year egg industry, its third most valuable farm sector behind milk and potatoes. But double-digit growth in sales suggests that Maine egg farmers can take advantage of this emerging, niche market, and add revenue and jobs.

"The way the trend is going, you're going to see a lot more of this," said David Radlo, the company's president and chief

executive officer.

Radlo Foods has plants in Turner and Leeds. It is among three companies that have come to dominate brown egg production in Maine. Dorothy, based in Winthrop, and Quality Egg of New England LLC, located at the former A.J. DeCoster Egg Farms facilities in Turner, round out the trio. Together they produce 100 million dozen eggs a year.

Radlo has been positioning his company to profit from concerns over food safety and the nation's increasing appetite for all things natural and organic. Last year he introduced a pilot program, using Maine eggs, in which a laser etches tamper-proof freshness and identification codes on the surface of each shell. That program has since received national recognition.

The prototype egg house in Winthrop represents a balancing act: On one hand, Radlo is trying to satisfy consumers who favor the more-humane treatment of farm animals. At the same time, he must guard his flocks from evolving disease threats, such as avian flu.

These forces are leading to innovation in Maine's egg industry, and some confusion at the supermarket dairy cooler.

Commodity egg farms don't treat chickens like backyard pets. Millions of birds typically live their lives stacked in narrow cages, which has led animal-rights activists to put pressure on both producers and supermarkets.

Growing consumer concern over these issues has forced many of the nation's big egg producers to adopt new care guidelines, which include more cage space and better food, water and ventilation. Shoppers can recognize eggs that meet these standards by noticing a check-mark seal from the United Egg Producers on the box.

The eggs Radlo is producing in the Winthrop henhouse go beyond basic standards. They meet stricter rules set by Humane Farm Animal Care, a Virginia-based food animal rights group. To win the group's Certified Humane label, egg producers must follow guidelines that run 29 pages and cover issues stretching from the number of square feet per chicken to how roosts are constructed.

Here in the converted Winthrop henhouse, birds are able to roam the vast, wood-slat floor, although they typically stay in clusters of 300 or so.

These aren't free-range chickens; they can't go outside and peck in the dirt. The threat of airborne diseases, among other factors, has long made large-scale egg production an indoor or covered operation.

Feed trays and water tubes hang from the ceiling. Light comes from overhead, compact-fluorescent bulbs. Metal nesting

houses line the walls, and eggs laid inside travel to a central collection point by conveyor belt.

Wooden roosts and scratch pads made from artificial turf are set around to simulate barnyard conditions. Manure falls through the wood-slat floor to a collection area below. The Isa Brown crossbred hens being used in this pilot project are just 25 weeks old, and they're still being trained to lay in the nesting boxes. Ten times a day, workers walk through to pick up eggs laid on the scratch pads and floor.

This is not an economical way to produce eggs. The house now accommodates 20,000 birds where 80,000 once lived. More workers are needed to manage the operation. And special vegetarian feed costs 25 percent more than conventional feed.

"It costs a lot more to put chickens in a house, rather than an apartment complex," Radlo said. "But if the market wants it, we're going to produce it."

The equation makes sense because Radlo can get a better price for cage-free eggs. The Winthrop eggs are sold under Radlo's Born Free and Eggland's Best brands. A recent visit to the dairy cooler at Shaw's Supermarket in Falmouth highlights the difference, and the changing face of the egg case.

Shaw's sells the large-size Eggland's Best, Cage Free for \$2.99 a dozen. The package carries the Certified Humane seal.

Also on the shelves are Born Free All Natural Omega 3 eggs, which include omega 3 fatty acids believed to protect against heart disease. These jumbo eggs have the United Egg Producers label and sell for \$2.99.

They are joined by all natural, omega 3 eggs from Land O Lakes, for \$3.19; Nellie's cage-free, omega 3 eggs, for \$2.99; and Shaw's Wild Harvest cage-free eggs, for \$2.99.

By comparison, a dozen large store brand eggs sell for \$1.69 - a bit more than half the price.

That price spread is considered good news by Holly Bridges, the outreach director at Humane Farm Animal Care. In larger markets, competition has reduced the difference to roughly 25 percent, she said.

"That's awesome," she said of the high price for cage free in Maine. "That shows a strong value system. People are stepping up with their pocketbooks."

The demand also interests Don Hoenig, state veterinarian with the Maine Department of Agriculture. Hoenig visited the Radlo/Dorothy henhouse recently. Cage-free eggs, he said, could give the industry a boost similar to what the dairy business is seeing in Maine, as farmers have diversified with organic milk and specialty cheeses. The state had 10 licensed dairy processors a few years back, he said; now it has 50.

"What's neat about what Radlo's doing is he's trying to fill a niche market and he's doing it in Maine," Hoenig said.

Cage-free eggs now make up 15 percent of sales for Radlo Foods. Some natural supermarket chains want all their eggs to be cage free, Radlo said. Dozens of colleges buy only cage-free eggs.

Radlo said he can't estimate when the demand for cage-free eggs will peak. Three years ago, this market didn't exist for large, commercial producers.



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As of last week, the Winthrop flock was laying more than 16,000 eggs a day. Eggs laid today will be on supermarket shelves in Boston within four days.

But Radlo can't meet the demand with Maine eggs. He's currently supplementing the New England market through another farm in Pennsylvania. That's why he's planning a second cage-free henhouse with 20,000 birds in Winthrop.

"I want to sell eggs as close to the source as possible," he said.

Staff photos by John Patriquin