

## **Small Flock Education for Hobby Producers**

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### **SITUATION**

The US Department of Agriculture performs an agriculture census every five years in which they publish the number of farms with between 1-49 laying hens. This value is one of the most accurate data points used in tracking backyard flock populations. From 2012 to 2017, there was a 16% increase in number of backyard flocks and 20% increase in number of backyard flock laying hens according to the National Agricultural Statistics Service (USDA-NASS, 2021).

Increased numbers of hobby or backyard flocks present the opportunity for expanded Extension education. A 2014 Poultry Science study surveyed backyard flock owners on relevant flock management topics. When respondents were asked where they get their information, 87% used the internet, 62% used books or magazines, 40% used feed stores, but only 28% used university specialists or publications (Elkhoraihi, 2014). A 2019 agriculture needs assessment survey performed in Lincoln County asked residents what UGA Extension programming they would be interested in and 33% of survey respondents indicated interest in a hobby flock program.

### **EDUCATIONAL OBJECTIVES**

The objective of this program was to develop and deliver education in a variety of management topics in order to improve bird health, reduce mortality, and reduce expenses associated with hobby flock keeping. Our goal was for attendees to be able to select appropriate breeds for their flock, raise healthy chicks, develop safe housing, manage nutrition for efficient production, identify common health issues, and humanely process birds if necessary.

University of Georgia Cooperative Extension is an equal opportunity provider. All participants were welcomed, regardless of gender, race, ethnicity, or social identity.

### **ACTIVITIES AND TEACHING METHODS**

The Lincoln County ANR agent developed curriculum for two programs held in 2020 targeting small flock producers. A four-week seminar series was developed and presented locally in Lincoln County, Georgia in February, followed by a five-week webinar series presented via Zoom in July. The programs used a combination of live seminars, take-home materials, and follow-up consultations. For the in-person series, participants received a folder which contained the slide decks for each lecture and additional related materials and handouts. For the virtual webinar series, live lectures were presented by University of Georgia Extension Agents and Poultry Specialists, with recorded versions and the associated slide decks made available to participants via OneDrive. A combination of additional websites and handouts were also included in the OneDrive for clients to access at their leisure. During the in-person session, live birds were brought in to teach appropriate handling skills to participants. Local follow-up consultations were provided in 2020 for three of the in-person participants to assess their coop design and overall bird health. During these consultations, Robyn identified coop design ideals that participants met effectively such as burying run fences and providing adequate feed and water space. Suggestions were made at one property to decrease the angle of the ramp from the run into the coop and to adjust the roost heights inside the coop. A second client asked for

feedback on his nutrition program and assistance in transitioning his hens from a growing diet onto a laying ration.

## **COLLABORATIONS**

The Hobby Flock Seminar Series was a collaborative effort between University of Georgia Extension Specialists Dr. Casey Ritz and Dr. Claudia Dunkley and Agriculture and Natural Resource Agents Robyn Stewart (Lincoln County) and Zachary McCann (Banks County).

## **RESULTS**

The pilot Hobby Flock Seminar Series had 17 participants from Lincoln County and the surrounding areas. Of these, 58% were considering starting a flock, 14% were new flock owners, and 23% were experienced owners (>1-year of experience). Eighty-eight percent of participants intended to keep laying hens, with the remainder interested in meat birds.

The Hobby Flock Virtual Webinar Series had a total of 141 registrants from 10 states and 2 countries. Weekly attendance averaged 40 participants per class.

A post assessment was required to access the webinar recordings, handouts, and other materials from the class. Materials from the class were made available to the general public through social media (Facebook). To date, 58 people have accessed the class materials, 30% of which did not attend the program.

## **IMPACT**

All sessions of the hobby flock series were evaluated using a voluntary post-program survey. The survey assessed their knowledge of the presented topics, behavioral changes they intended to make, and an overall rating of the program. Participants indicated the instructors were good or excellent 91% of the time, and the presentation and information as good or excellent 92% of the time. Overall satisfaction for the program was ranked good or excellent 94% of the time, and respondents indicated they learned something new in 95% of the sessions.

Both in-person and webinar participants were asked to identify behaviors they intended to change as a result of the class. Immediately after the program, participants agreed to make changes to coop design (89%), breed selection (94%), feed selection (94%), incubation/brooding practices (96%) and processing practices (89%). Final comments included “Great class. Covered all topics I was interested in,” and “Very informative as I was looking for information on how to get started with chickens. Easy to follow and understand!”

Six months following the program, a follow-up evaluation survey was sent to all registrants to gauge what changes in behavior were actually made and what the economic impact of those changes was. Participants stated that the breeds, anatomy, and physiology lecture was most useful to them (35%) followed by coop design and predator management (26%). The least useful lecture was incubation, brooding, and processing (30%), which may be due to most respondents purchasing already hatched chicks or mature birds instead of incubating and brooding their own. All respondents (n=23) indicated changing behaviors as a result of the series. Changes included improving coop design (35%), altering feeding programs (27%) and taking steps to improve bird health through biosecurity and vaccinations (13%). As a result of these behavioral changes, respondents reported increased productivity of meat and eggs (36%), reduced feed, health care, and replacement bird expenses (29%), decreased bird mortality (21%) and increased profit from meat and egg sales (7%).

## **EVALUATION AND FUTURE IMPLICATIONS**

Both the in-person and virtual Hobby Flock Series used voluntary post-program evaluations to compare pre- and post- program knowledge. Participants were encouraged to add comments, ask questions, and suggest topics for future programming. A follow-up survey six months after the series were used to evaluate long-term behavior change and economic impact of the program. The need for hobby flock education efforts paired with the success of the 2020 Hobby Flock Programs highlights a key opportunity for the Cooperative Extension system. The evaluations for this program asked participants to identify additional topics of interest, and responses included meat bird processing, licensing and selling, gardening with chickens, egg candling, and others. Future goals for this series are to expand into meat bird production, collaborate with the UGA Small Business Development Center on small flock marketing and profitability programs, and to host Egg Candling Certification Courses with the Georgia Department of Agriculture.

## **REFERENCES:**

Elkhoraibi, C., Blatchford, R., Pitesky, M., & Mench, J. (2014). Backyard chickens in the United states: A survey of flock owners. *Poultry Science*, 93(11), 2920-2931. doi:10.3382/ps.2014-04154