



## Get involved

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If you want to succeed in broiler farming, you have to participate in the process. Too often I see producers limiting their involvement to buying day-old chicks, feed and medicines, throwing them all into a cage and hoping that mortalities will be low and production weights high.

Other meanings of the word 'participation' include: contribution, input, sharing, partaking, involvement and membership.

Yes, dear producer, *you* need to participate in the process of taking a day old chick and raising it to the correct weight and condition in the most efficient or cost effective manner and in as short a time span as possible. You have to be involved.

I would like to point out a few areas in which I have

over the past year noticed a lack of involvement by a number of producers.

### Temperature

I noticed a lot of temperature related problems during the year, resulting mostly in high mortalities in the first week and poor or uneven growth over the course of the production cycle.

A number of farmers have no or very few thermometers in place to be able to adequately monitor the temperature of the cage at floor level. Other farmers have thermometers in place, but these are placed at the height of the farmer's head instead of at ground level where the chicks are placed. These readings therefore are of no use to the wellbeing of the chicks.

In many instances where farmers have thermometers in place, they do not check them hourly to ensure that the cage temperature is as required at chick level. Some farmers do not even know that the cage temperature needs to be adjusted for the age of the chicken and that

a chicken requires a certain temperature to function optimally at a certain age.

This information is out there, it's a matter of taking responsibility and requesting the information from your chick supplier.

I also noticed that even though farmers realised the temperature in their cages was not correct, they did not take any action to try and correct the temperature. A simple example hereof is one case in which a farmer's cage was very cold in the first week and she did not have enough brooders to heat up all the chicks. Her solution was to hope and pray that the chicks would survive and prosper. However, a simple solution was to make the brooding area smaller and only expose the chicks to an area where the temperature could be maintained and controlled. The density problem was mitigated by adding some extra feed trays and water drinkers, and positioning them so that all the chicks in the reduced brooding area could get to the feed. This was not ideal and the pros would laugh at us, but at the end of the day total mortalities were very low and growth was even.

### Floor or litter quality

We are farming with chickens, not pigs. In fact, I would not even expect a pig to survive in some of the conditions that I have seen.

On numerous occasions I have found that farmers with complaints about high mortalities and poor performance were not paying attention to the quality of the bedding in the cages.

Some farmers place chicks on the bare ground or cement floors without any form of bedding for insulation and spillage control. Sometimes the farmers who were using bedding had not changed their bedding in months, but had also not taken steps to maintain the quality of the bedding.

A day old chick needs to be insulated from the floor so as not to lose body heat to the cold floor. The wood shavings need to be able to absorb water spillages and moisture from faeces.



The floor of this cage is covered with litter that is completely wet, which is a very unhealthy condition for chickens to live in as it promotes bacteria growth and increases the levels of ammonia in the cage, which will burn the birds' feet, joints and underside of the chickens. This will definitely lead to high mortalities amongst the flock and the quality of the meat of most of the surviving birds will eventually be so poor that any decent abattoir will reject it.



I visited this farmer who was complaining of high mortalities and poor growth. It is quite clear that this cage setup is totally inadequate and the birds were not being taken care of properly. To begin with, there are too many chickens in the space provided. On top of that, there are too few feeders and drinkers for the birds, and often the feeders that were there were empty. Needless to say this batch did not do well, however the farmer changed his attitude and approach with his next batch and called me at 28 days to say that his chickens were big and healthy with very low mortalities and that his customers had started buying more.

Wood shavings need to be treated with a disinfectant before the chicks are placed and then again on a regular basis to subdue any bacteria that may be breeding in

the litter. Wet litter should be removed immediately.

A good indication of poor litter quality is the presence of ammonia in the air. The ammonia damages the respiratory system of the chicken and also burns and damages the chicken's skin. In both instances this allows bacteria to enter the chicken's system, resulting in preventable mortalities.

If you are not prepared to walk barefoot on the cage floor, you should not expect your chickens to live on it either. If you have leaking pipes, repair them. If the chickens are knocking the drinkers over this is normally as a result of poor water availability and the chickens racing to get to the water when water is put in the cage, so make sure you have enough drinkers in place and that water is available 24 hours a day, every day.

### Stocking density

Farmers do not pay attention to the capacity of their cage (size) and setup to be able to provide a comfortable environment for their chickens, where food and water are readily and easily available to all the birds in the cage.

Stocking density is calculated by dividing the number of chickens to be housed by the area (square meters) of the available floor space in the cage. So 1 500 chicks placed in a 100 square meter cage equates to 15 chickens per square meter. I don't recommend that you place more than 15 birds per square meter unless your cage setup is absolutely correct and all the birds have equal access to the feed and water.

### Ordering of chicks and feed

On many occasions customers are disappointed that they cannot get chicks or feed from their suppliers on short notice.

Poultry production, as with all farming operations, is not something that just happens. You need to have a plan and you need to be prepared. Be pro-active, be involved and you will succeed.

One has to bear in mind that chicks take approximately four weeks to hatch and are usually set in the hatchery when ordered. Feed is also a product of manufacture,



The wire mesh of this cage is too large and allows birds, mice and rats to enter the cage in search of the feed and water that is available to the chickens. Birds and vermin like rats and mice will bring diseases into the cage that will have a negative impact on the health of your flock.



As a result of too few feeders and drinkers and the restricted space available to the chickens, the chickens jump on each other in an attempt to get to the feed and water. As you know a chicken's nails can be very sharp. Such scratching will result in open wounds that easily become infected and result in mortalities.

starting on the farm and subject to bagging and transport restrictions. So here again it does not help to order feed a day or two in advance.

This year in particular there are indications are that the availability of day old chicks will be limited. Do your planning well in advance. Speak to your customers, determine what sort of quantities you are required to produce during the next 12 months and place your orders for feed and day old chicks in advance.

Failing to plan is planning to fail. ❁