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ENCOURAGING START FOR NEW NAIRNSHIRE EGG LAYING UNIT

A brand new state-of-the-art free-range egg unit on a Nairnshire farm is producing ahead of target after eight weeks into its first lay.

Father and son, Robbie and Robert Craigie, Milton of Kilravock, Cawdor, Nairn, decided to go ahead with a significant planned investment in poultry housing despite losing out on a grant under the Scotland Rural Development Programme (SRDP).



Their initial plans for a laying unit were scuppered by the market for eggs going against them and plan B to move into broilers was also set to go when 2 Sisters suddenly decided to pull out of broiler production in the North of Scotland. By this time, the SRDP cupboard was bare and no grant was available.

“However, an approach from Robert Chapman of Farmlay offering a market for free-range eggs to build up a Highland brand encouraged us to go ahead even without the grant and it is a decision we don’t regret,” says Robbie, who has moved out of outdoor pigs after 40 years to concentrate on egg production.

“Our pig enterprise did us well for many years but outdoor pigs are a lot of work and the market is extremely volatile.”

The first batch of 16,000 Hy-Line Brown hens moved into the new unit in February and, although it is early days, are well on target to produce an above-average 320 eggs in their 56-week laying period.

“It has been a steep learning curve for us both but we have listened to advice and it is a very easily managed system,” says Robert.

The Craigie's opted for a 21m x 80m shed built to a high standard of finish by Lovie Construction who have considerable experience of poultry buildings and have recently completed a similar building for Mr Chapman at West Cockmuir, Strichen.



“We could have gone for a cheaper building,” says Robert (Craigie). “But I’m glad we took the advice of Jim Lovie who advised us to go for a higher, more robust building, with a concrete finish and higher standard of ventilation. It is an all-steel building with no wood which is an important consideration for disease control.”

The latest Big Dutchman Natura 264 free-range system from Yorkshire-based pig and poultry equipment specialists, Newquip, has been installed and is proving a hit. The tiered perching and nest box structure means very few eggs land on the floor which is the big advantage of the Natura system and saves a lot of time collecting stray eggs.

An extra two rows of nest boxes on top of the system are an addition to the four found in the original Natura 260 system and allows more birds to be kept per running metre of shed whilst maintaining the nine birds per square metre of usable area due to the wider, shorter unit

Hens can see everything they need – perches, nest boxes, feeders and drinkers – and are free to roam around as they wish to enjoy a dust bath in the wood shavings, with outdoor access during the day.



They quickly work out where the feed and water is and the nest boxes to lay their eggs. Every effort is made to make sure the hens perch for the night to discourage them laying eggs on the floor and it is worthwhile training the hens to do this at an early stage.

“Demand is increasing from supermarkets for free-range eggs which command a premium price compared with barn eggs or enriched cages which provide more space than conventional cages to comply with new EU rules on stocking rates,” says Robert.

Hens receive feed six times a day from a chain feeder which is automatically triggered and have access to nipple drinkers. Feed consumption is working out at 117g/day and water usage for the flock is 3200 litres/day.

Feedmix’s Tropper mixer wagon, specially designed for pig and poultry feeds, calls once a week to mix the ration which comprises home-grown barley, soya, limestone, rape oil and layer minerals.

Flaps on the nest boxes give hens peace to lay their eggs and lights are dimmed from 8.00pm onwards to simulate natural lighting and switched off automatically from 9.15pm to 5.15am the next morning. The Craigie’s estimate that 95% of eggs are laid during the first four hours of the lights coming on.

Temperature is controlled using fresh air chimneys and gable end extraction fans. No additional heating is required as the heat generated by the birds is utilised. The system works on negative pressure, pulling the fresh air via the chimneys into the warm house air. When the popholes open, the system uses balanced pressure by forcing the air in through the inlet chimneys at the same rate as the gable fans extract it. This minimises the amount of air coming in through the large pophole and maintains the optimum air movement.



Eggs are collected by six moving belts which run the whole length of the building alongside the nest boxes while muck is also removed automatically by belt on to a cross belt where it is conveyed to a trailer.

The Craigie's reckon they are saving around £20,000 a year in bought-in fertiliser by using the high nitrogen manure produced by the hens, an important consideration given current low cereal prices. Oilseed rape gets a late dressing of nitrogen but otherwise no fertiliser is applied at sowing.

The biggest task of the day is packing the eggs which takes about two hours each morning. Eggs are collected twice a week by Farmlay who are finding an increasing supermarket demand for free range.

Robbie and Robert are happy with their investment but would not have embarked on it without the assurance of a guaranteed market through the Farmlay producer group. Cash flow is good compared with the vagaries of the pig market and the working environment is much better than tending to outdoor pigs, particularly on a cold winter's day. And it leaves them plenty of time to get on with arable work on their 500-acre farm.