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Hen haven: Ian Littleton at Clarendon Farm Eggs at Gulgong in NSW, where he runs hens at 1500 a hectare under his Humane Choice's Free Range Project.

ON FARM

Clarendon Farm Eggs: Free-range an ethical, profitable approach

SARAH HUDSON, The Weekly Times

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IN THE poultry industry, you'd be hard-pressed to find anyone more knowledgeable about hen farming than Ian Littleton.

The 66-year-old runs a 120ha poultry farm at Gulgong in NSW, called Clarendon Farm Eggs, stocking 6000 free-range Lowman chooks, and selling 1500 dozen eggs a week through wholesale and retail markets in Sydney.



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[AGRIBUSINESS](#)
[DAIRY](#)
[LIVESTOCK](#)
[CROPPING](#)
[PROPERTY](#)

HAS 14 mobile chook homes

SELLS 1500 dozen eggs a week through wholesale and retail markets in Sydney

ACCREDITED with Humane Choice's Free Range Project

Ian grew up on a poultry farm near Toowoomba in Queensland, and, after his father passed away and the farm was sold, studied an agricultural degree at Queensland Agricultural College, specialising in poultry production.

For nearly 20 years he worked for the NSW agricultural department as a poultry officer, advising farmers on best practice production methods.

He said it was around the late 1980s, when the egg market was deregulated, that the department began fielding queries on free-range farming.

“At that time there were few free-range egg farms because the quota had held egg production in the hands of the cage system,” Ian said.

“Because I was getting a lot of queries, I became interested in free-range and did a fair bit of research.

“There were signs in the UK and Europe that consumers wanted ethical, free-range eggs ... there were also environmental and disease problems from manure build-up in intensive systems.”

As such, Ian approached Western Sydney University, sourced seed funding of \$20,000 and established a demonstration project of portable houses based on traditional hen farming in the 1940s and '50s “when egg production was generally from orchards running chooks under trees”.

CRACKING THE CODE

THE project was on 4ha, starting with 400 birds. Money from egg sales was funnelled back into the project and eventually it reached 4000 birds with six mobile sheds each housing 600 birds, and about 10 smaller sheds.

“The department was getting flak from the cage industry and became worried about how much time I was putting into free-range. I made the decision to leave the department and buy out the university's interests.”



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[AGRIBUSINESS](#)
[DAIRY](#)
[LIVESTOCK](#)
[CROPPING](#)
[PROPERTY](#)

In November, Ian became accredited with Humane Choice's Free Range Project, which has a stocking rate of 1500 hens/ha; while his certifier Australian Certified Organic has a rate of 2500/ha.

Last February, after years of discussion, industry and government agreed on a 10,000 birds/ha national free-range stocking standard.

“Back in the ‘90s I was part of the discussions about the 1500/ha stocking rate. There was a lot of science that underpinned that rate, including beak trimming, full feather cover, also manure build-up and nutrient run-off.

“That science was lacking in the most recent debate and I’m not pleased with the outcome ... big intensive systems are offering very little improvements in terms of welfare.

“That’s why Humane Choice appealed to me because of its low stocking rate and the fact it prohibits beak trimming. It’s what my customers expect of their product.”

STOCK TAKE

IAN said all his farm productions worked profitably around his low stocking rate.

Since being one of the pioneers of mobile chook sheds in the ‘90s, he has refined his sheds further.

Clarendon Farm Eggs has 14 mobile homes, which Ian makes himself, each stocking 500 birds and measuring 65 square metres.

The homes are for roosting and nesting, with a sprinkler system on hot days and draught-proof for winter days.

Nesting boxes are tiered and staggered so that manure does not fall on other birds, while the boxes themselves are constantly cleaned and new wood shavings added.

Boxes are between shoulder and knee height as egg collection is done several times a day by hand, with Ian’s full-time staff of three. “Eggs are much cleaner this way. On a conveyor they can crack or bump into dirty ones,” he said.

The homes are on wheels and moved weekly between four ranges each of 5ha, with an added range rested for a year.



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[NEWS](#)
[AGRIBUSINESS](#)
[DAIRY](#)
[LIVESTOCK](#)
[CROPPING](#)
[PROPERTY](#)

I've had a lot of discussions with NSW chief vet officer about this and I've looked at the issue closely. Breakouts of disease are usually in combined intensive and free range farms," he said.

"I don't have open dams so ducks aren't attracted to the farm and the ratio of our birds to feeders means hens drive off other birds. Biosecurity risks on free-range farms can be managed well and aren't as great as intensive farms."

GRASS CASTLE

PASTURES are native grasses and this year Ian will begin a renovation program of mixed perennial pastures, starting with 7ha.

Two 500kg grain feeders — containing a mixed ration — supplies 500 birds, while water is drawn from a well then filtered and UV treated.

Ian buys in 2500 day-old Lowman chicks three times a year, keeping them in a brooder house until aged about 11 weeks (in summer these chicks are free to roam from four weeks of age and in winter seven weeks of age).

At 11 weeks they are kept in their age group and never mixed.

Baby chicks are vaccinated for infectious bronchitis and Marek's disease, but otherwise Ian uses no chemicals or synthetic inputs, focusing heavily on hygiene and cleanliness.

Given these measures, he has never had a problem with parasites or mites

Because Ian relies on hand- collection of eggs throughout the day in nest boxes that are constantly cleaned, he does not wash eggs, but dry cleans them.

"Eggs have a natural wax coating and if they're washed this is removed and puts them at greater risk of problems further down the supply chain. So we put a lot of effort into keeping eggs clean," he said.

Ian said egg farming was not necessarily a love. Rather, he was driven by a determination to show free-range, ethical egg farming was profitable and productive.

"I enjoyed my time working for the department and I don't regret leaving because it's been a challenge making this work.