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Lakewatch Farms' production has exploded from 480 broiler chickens in 2022 to 8,000 this year, with the potential to double production next year. It's pastured poultry is available at farmers' markets in Glasgow, Wilmore, and Nicholasville and retail stores in Glasgow and Lexington, and can be ordered online.

SEPT 08 South central Kentucky farm's production of pastured poultry is booming

By Chris Aldridge
Kentucky Ag News

FRANKFORT - What began as a part-time business venture three years ago among three longtime friends has turned into a fast-growing Kentucky Proud pastured poultry operation near Smiths Grove, Ky.

Founding partners Alex Houchens, Benjamin Williamson, and Steven Richardson met as students at Barren Cr Middle School in nearby Glasgow. They were later joined by William Callis.

“Four of us came together to get this farm going,” Houchens said as poultry producers across the state celebrate National Poultry Month during September. “I’ve known two of these guys for a really long time.

“This was just meant to be a side project, now I feel like it’s driving us. It’s blowing up.”

In three years, the farm’s production has exploded from 480 broiler chickens in 2022 to 8,000 this year.

“We have the potential to double our production next year,” Houchens said. “We’ve been overwhelmed with the response.”

The partners named the land that they lease Lakewatcher Farms because “when the sun rises and sets here, it looks like a lake in the sky,” Houchens noted.

The men were heavily influenced by regenerative farmer Joel Salatin, who has been appointed by President Trump as an advisor to the U.S. Department of Agriculture. Salatin has written 15 books, including “Pastured Poultry Profits” and “Folks, This Ain’t Normal: A Farmer’s Advice for Happier Hens, Healthier People, and a Better World.” He received the American Pastured Poultry Producers Lifetime Achievement Award for his contributions to the farming method of allowing his chickens to roam freely outdoors in confined spaces.

“We started Lakewatcher Farms in 2022 just as a function of seeing a need for premium chicken,” Houchens said. “We’re just standing on the shoulders of giants like Joel Salatin, following in his footsteps in a way.

“It’s amazing how much customers value what you don’t do to chicken rather than what you do!”

Much of the difference can be noticed in the taste, Houchens claims.

“In our early days at Metcalfe County Farmers’ Market in Edmonton, we conducted blind taste tests,” he said, noting Lakewatcher chicken was chosen the tastiest every time. He pointed out that most customers also chose the taste of pastured poultry in similar tests across the nation.

“Thousands and thousands of households say you can absolutely tell the difference,” Houchens added. “We thought, ‘There’s definitely something here.’”

Lakewatcher Farms keeps its chickens moving daily around the pasture in mobile shelters.

“We roll 80-100 birds from one footprint to the next,” Houchens said. “Our approach is to move our birds every day under fresh pasture. Our forage is Kentucky pasture; There’s no secret sauce. By raising our birds outdoors, the flavor, texture, and quality of the meat is so much better. The fresh air, fresh pastures, and clean environments combine for a great-tasting bird.”

Houchens says Kentucky offers two key components to pasture-raised chicken that many of his farming counterparts don’t have access to.

“Because we’re in Kentucky, we have access to an abundant supply of non-GMO, high-quality feed because of the bourbon industry,” he said, referring to spent grains, a byproduct created during the distilling process.

“We’re also fortunate to have an air chiller processor, which is extremely rare,” Houchens added, referring to Misty Lea Farm Poultry Processing in southern Christian County. He called air chilling “a huge key to our success,” noting the process locks in the chicken’s juices, which “makes a huge difference.

“Bring that together with high-quality feed, and we’re in a unique position. We couldn’t have done this just anywhere.”

Houchens said in the poultry industry, it’s typically acceptable that 15 percent of chickens will die before they reach maturity.

“Our mortality is under 4 percent,” Houchens said. “We do not vaccinate chicks. The birds are clean and produce exceptional chicken.”

Lakewatcher Farms raises a standard broiler breed, Cornish Cross. In the future, Houchens hopes to begin raising a French breed, Bresse Gauloise, which is considered the best quality table chicken in the world and sought by fine dining restaurants.

“That is definitely where we want to go,” he said. “Right now, we’re trying to strike the middle ground by providing gourmet quality chicken that’s still affordable.”

Lakewatcher chicken is available at Bounty of the Barrens Farmers’ Market in Glasgow, Wilmore Farmers’ Market, and Nicholasville Farmers’ Market and Dodd’s Corner Farmers’ Market in Nicholasville, and two retail stores: Phillips Family Butcher Shop in Glasgow and Good Foods Co-op in Lexington. Houchens is also working to expand availability to nearby Bowling Green. Lakewatcher chicken can also be ordered online at www.LakewatcherFarms.com.

“When we go to farmers’ markets and talk to customers, we see really, across the board, people are way more food conscious,” Houchens added. “They want to know where their chicken comes from and how it’s raised.”