

Farm Fresh Turkey Production



Introduction

Farm fresh turkey production refers to the production of turkeys in small units, at a relatively leisurely pace as distinct from the large-scale contract commercial all year round production. Turkey production fits in well on many farms and can substantially augment farm income. Turkeys produced on a farm fresh basis are usually aimed at the Christmas market and are processed and sold by the producer. The starting point is to find the market and gear everything towards it. Turkeys can be grown in as little twelve weeks and for up to twenty-four weeks depending on the requirements at point of sale.

Housing

Turkeys can be reared in almost any kind of farm building with some modifications. A controlled environment is not essential for Christmas turkeys but is a must for all year round production. Unlike other poultry, turkeys grow and perform well on fairly low house temperatures (15°C). A brooding area with a heating source is essential for the first four weeks approximately. This should be sectioned off and draught proofed. Young turkeys are weaned off heat gently and carefully over several days. The behaviour of the flock is the best guide to indicate if the birds are comfortable. When birds are huddled together it indicates draughts and cold areas. Ideally the birds should be spread out over the space provided. From six weeks onwards turkeys can thrive well in lean-to-buildings with good litter or bedding such as chopped straw or white wood shavings. House size is based on the maximum weight of birds to be in the house at any one time. For best farm fresh results generous space should be allowed – 0.4 to 0.5 square metres per bird and houses (without controlled environment) should as a general rule not be stocked at rates greater than 20 kg per square metre. Expected gross margin per bird - €7.62

Temperature

Newly hatched turkeys leave an incubator temperature of 38°C. Because of their inability to maintain body heat (due to lack of feathering) they must be placed in draught free surroundings of 37°C for the first day reducing by 0.5°C per day until they are sufficiently well feathered to be able to thrive without the aid of artificial heat.



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This is one of a series of fact sheets on potential income generating activities.

All fact sheets are available in the Advisory Section of the Teagasc Website
<http://www.teagasc.ie/>

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Teagasc Fact Sheets present a brief overview of a topic. Further detailed advice should always be sought from relevant sources

Turkeys, more than any other category of poultry can perform well over a wide range of temperatures. Temperature and feed conversion ratios are closely interlinked. At 21⁰C turkeys give the best feed conversion ratios but they grow better i.e. put on greater bodyweight and yield more breast meat at lower temperatures. Temperatures as low as 12⁰C give good body weights and returns as the extra bodyweight will more than compensate for the extra costs in feed consumption.

What is Involved?

Once it is decided that the facilities on a farm are suitable for turkey production the next task is to acquire the skills necessary to rear and present to the consumer a well finished table bird. These skills include management in the brooding, rearing and fattening stages. Feeding and lighting programmes as well as general day to day management and disease prevention techniques are vital.

Turkey flocks can be produced successfully on free range. This system requires a secure, dedicated grass paddock with daytime access.

Marketing

Turkeys go directly into the human food chain and as such must be produced and processed so that food safety and product quality can be assured. Turkeys produced for the farm fresh trade are sold, as the name implies, fresh from the farm. Turkeys for this trade are dry plucked giving a good finish and the possibility of hanging the birds for the flavour to mature. Increasingly, the demand is for oven ready, farm fresh turkeys. Birds must be prepared for the market in a suitable food premises. Processing involves a fairly intensive work-load. After one year in business a good product will be the best reference for business in future years. Satisfied customers become long-term clientele, willing to pay for freshness and quality.

Flock Management

Turkeys are highly responsive to the effects of management. Birds with the same apparent housing, nutrition and facilities are capable of giving vastly different results depending on the care taken with management. Knowledge and skills are important prerequisites to the establishment of an enterprise.