

Norfolk egg producer's big welfare investment

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Specialist Broadland egg producer Heath Brooks is investing about £300,000 in welfare-friendly housing to meet Europe's rules on keeping laying hens.

By Christmas, his six flocks and his 24,000 hens will be producing eggs in new "enriched" or more spacious "colony" systems.

Mr Brooks, who has been involved in the poultry industry for 40 years, started Broadland Eggs in 1973. He returned to the family poultry business in 1971 although his uncle started keeping laying hens in 1946.

"My family has always kept chickens, so I came back to what was the family business at the time," he added.

He supplies his own eggs and also free-range to butchers, independent retailers and caterers throughout Norfolk. And he is determined to continue to supply the market with fresh, quality Norfolk eggs from his farm, which are checked, handled and packed traditionally by a small team of long-serving staff at East Ruston, near Stalham.

"We've built up a medium-size business over a number of years supplying a range of outlets from butchers – all sorts. Anybody who wants eggs we will be happy to supply them."

It will be a major investment, of about £18 per bird or a total of some £290,000 to install the new larger cages, which will be completed by Christmas – ahead of Europe's January 1 legal deadline.

More than half his 24,000 hens have been moved into the new roomier accommodation, which allows hens plenty of headroom, ample perches, and also space to flap their wings. Instead of keeping birds five to a cage, his hens are now in groups or colonies or a maximum of 60. The new housing includes a scratching area of Astroturf and nest boxes, which are sited away from the brightest lights.

Where there were once dozens, now he is one of only two intensive producers in Norfolk, which have decided to invest in the new welfare-friendly housing.

Mr Brooks said that eggs represented "one of the best value for money sources of protein" for consumers. "Our problem is getting that message across to the consumer," he added.

His eggs, which are packed and delivered directly for sale, were fresher than those available in larger retailers. "We take the egg from the chicken and by the next day they'll be in the shops. Shoppers going into their local shops buying eggs are our saving grace and they will find it is much better value," he added.

Most of his Broadland Eggs are packed in half-dozen boxes but he supplies Norfolk's leading independent retailer, Roys of Wroxham, with packs containing a dozen. Some larger customers also buy eggs by the case of 30 dozen eggs.

"What the housewife wants is to be able to buy a box of eggs; then she'll come back and buy them again," said Mr Brooks.

Large eggs are the most popular, which are packed in yellow boxes. "Many of our customers, more country people, prefer the bigger eggs," he added.

Typically, most large supermarkets sell by mixed weights. "We're still selling by the old-fashioned way – with large weighing 63g to 73g, and medium from 53g to 62g.

Mr Brooks said that investment was being made to improve the welfare for hens. "While it will cost us money, it will further improve the welfare of the chickens and also satisfy the demands of welfare groups. We've taken birds out of old cages and moved them overnight into the new cages. It looks an ideal method to keep chickens.

“If you look at them, and I’ve been caring for chickens for 40 years, I can say: the hens look good. I don’t think that we will get any better performance.”

He said that efforts by Euro MP Stuart Agnew had highlighted concerns that at least five member states in Europe would be producing eggs from systems, which would be illegal from the new year.

Egg producers in Britain have invested about £400m to comply with the EU’s new welfare rules.

He urged consumers to make sure they bought eggs containing the UK mark as a guarantee of quality.

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