



MICHIGAN SOYBEAN
PROMOTION COMMITTEE

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Creature comfort: A step inside the chicken houses reveals happy, healthy birds

If you step inside the chicken houses at Swan Creek Farms, you'll see a lot of chickens roaming the open floors. Most will be sitting and relatively quiet, aside from a little background chirping or clucking. The birds will be eating, drinking, posturing, dust bathing — all natural behaviors. They'll be clean and calm, assuming you're not running screaming through their house.

Swan Creek Farms, owned by Tony Carpenter and his cousin Leon Miller, is a typical Michigan broiler farm, raising young chickens for meat. Michigan's broiler industry consists of about a dozen farms like Swan Creek. All together, the farms raise 4½ million chickens each year, adding nearly \$15 million in tax revenue to Michigan's economy.

Like 98 percent of all farms in the United States, they are family farms. Most are contract growers for Miller Poultry (no relation to Leon Miller). Contracting with a poultry company makes growing broilers more feasible for farmers because of the high cost of getting into broiler production and its great risks.

"When Miller Poultry was adding new barns," Carpenter says, "I jumped at the opportunity."

Miller Poultry made it easy for the cousins to add livestock production to their 400-acre crop farm in Southern Michigan near the tiny village of Sherwood. Carpenter and Miller have been producing chickens for Miller Poultry for five years now, and they are happy with the business relationship.

Indiana-based Miller Poultry is a small, family-owned company that hatches chicks, transports them, provides feed, supplies veterinary care, and processes the grown birds — all using local inputs. "Most of our farms have one or two grow-out houses," explains field representative Mark Tilbury. "We want small family farms to raise chickens for us."

"It's one thing I like about them," Carpenter points out. "I can call the president of the company. I like the working relationship with them."

Carpenter and Miller own the buildings and supply the labor and utilities; Miller Poultry owns the birds and feed. "It's their birds; we take care of them," Carpenter notes. Aside from the poultry company assuming all the risk, the arrangement gives the farmers a guaranteed market.

Carpenter and Miller raise 62,000 birds in two grow-out houses from the day the newly hatched chicks arrive until the broilers weigh 5¼ pounds 6 weeks later. The chicks are hatched at company-owned hatcheries, vaccinated against poultry diseases, and delivered to the farm. The partners grow out 6½ flocks a year, waiting two weeks between flocks to lessen the chance of disease.

Birds are free to roam within the grow-out house on open floors, but “are not free-range chickens, for several reasons,” Miller Poultry’s president and owner Galen Miller explains. “Free-range chickens are often found outdoors, where they’re challenged by weather, disease, and the risk of airborne contaminants,” he notes. “Baby chickens need to be warm and dry during the first two weeks of their lives, and couldn’t survive the elements.” Older chickens outdoors could suffer extreme stress, and even die, he adds. All the company’s chickens are raised inside, in a safe, stress-free environment with 24/7 access to fresh water and feed.

“It’s best to keep poultry indoors because it prevents exposure to wild birds, which carry disease,” says Richard “Mick” Fulton, a board certified-specialist in poultry medicine at the Diagnostic Center for Population and Animal Health at Michigan State University. “It also protects them from biting insects — like mosquitoes — that carry disease, and it cuts down on infection by parasites.”

According to Fulton, bird flu was transferred from wild to domestic poultry and then to humans in Asia and Europe where domesticated birds shared watering, feeding, and living areas with wild birds. But it’s not just bird flu to be concerned about, he said. “Newcastle disease was found recently in Wisconsin and Minnesota, and previously in Northern Michigan. In the past, cormorants spread it as they migrated south, and could spread it if they come into contact with poultry out of doors. Newcastle disease kills a lot of birds.”

Like all U.S. poultry producers, Swan Creek Farms uses no artificial or added hormones. The antibiotic-free, hormone-free, all-vegetable diet is formulated at the company’s feed mill from soybean meal, corn, minerals, and vitamins. As a matter of fact, Michigan’s broiler industry uses nearly 6,000 of the 428,000 tons of soybean meal consumed by Michigan livestock and poultry annually.

Acknowledging that consumers are concerned about where their food comes from and how it’s raised, Carpenter points out, “This is how we make a living. The healthier our birds are, the better we do. I’ll show anybody in here. The birds are comfortable and happy. They can eat, drink, and move around. They’ve got it made.”

Chickens are sensitive to changes in temperature and humidity, so the cousins use a computer-controlled ventilation and climate comfort system that was custom designed by a Mason, Michigan, company. “We keep track of everything,” Carpenter explains. “We track air quality, lighting, humidity, temperature, feed per day, water, and more. What gets measured gets managed, so you have to track those things.”

Managing countless details to make the broiler house safe, healthy, and comfortable is what Carpenter and Miller do all day, every day, for the birds.

The Michigan Soybean Promotion Committee invests soybean checkoff funds to enhance the profitability of Michigan’s soybean producers. MSPC builds markets for soybeans by conducting educational programs, promoting biodiesel and other new soybean uses, and funding agronomic research. A board of elected farmer-leaders directs MSPC on behalf of the more than 10,000 Michigan soybean farmers. For information about soybean checkoff results, call (989) 652-3294 or visit www.michigansoybean.org. To learn more about good stewardship practices and the connection between crop production, animal agriculture, and people, visit www.animalag.org.

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Photo caption: Two-week-old chickens gather to enjoy 24-hour access to fresh soybean-based feed at Swan Creek Farms near Sherwood. *Photo by Jeff Fleetwood.*