

Poultry Industry Workers



Occupational Brief Title Codes:

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Occupational Subtitles:

- Broiler Growers
- Egg Farm Owners
- Hatchery Owners
- Hatchery Workers
- Poultry Field Service Technicians
- Poultry Processing Workers
- Poultry Workers

Work Classification Based Related

D.O.T. Occupations:

- Animal Caretakers
- Canary Breeders
- Fur Farmers
- Hog-Confinement-System Managers

Interests Based Related

G.O.E. Occupations:

- Agricultural Produce Sorters
- Farmworkers
- Milkers
- Sheep Herders

Skills Based Related

O*NET Occupations:

- Animal Breeders
- Farmers and Ranchers
- Purchasing Agents and Buyers, Farm Products

Noteworthy Quote:

"Rapid growth of the poultry industry has created a wide variety of career opportunities. The poultry industry today offers positions in sales, marketing, product development, and business administration, as well as technical agricultural production. Motivated individuals will find rapid advancement, competitive wages, and excellent benefits."

— Steve Iseler, Director of Marketing, Cobb-Vantress, Inc., Siloam Springs, Arkansas

Poultry industry workers (ˈpoul-try ˈin-dus-try ˈwork-ers) breed, hatch, raise, process, and market poultry for meat or egg products. Although poultry includes chickens, turkeys, ducks, geese, game birds, pigeons, guinea fowl, and peafowl, the term poultry most commonly refers to chickens and turkeys.

Poultry farming in the United States started in the Midwest on family farms. Because of the large concentration of grain production, poultry farms expanded in this area until improved transportation of grains allowed it to spread across the country.

New methods of production, packaging, and distribution has lead to the wide availability of poultry in the nation's supermarkets. As meat, poultry is nutritious, low in fat, and economical. In the past several years, concern about diet and health have led consumers to shift from red meat to poultry. This trend has allowed the poultry industry to grow.

Most poultry industry workers raise poultry or eggs under contract for large corporations or for cooperatives who process and sell the meat or eggs to wholesalers. Almost all the chickens planned for broiler use are grown on contract. The producer or farmer agrees to grow chickens for a processor. This means the hatchery, feed mill, processing plant, and overall management is under one ownership. When the broilers reach market weight, the processor makes arrangements for processing. Under the contract, the producer is guaranteed a certain payment for the work and investment in equipment. The processor has an opportunity to manage the supply of poultry and thus insure a steadier flow of products to market.

Modern poultry farms are functional production units. They are furnished with power-operated feed-handling equipment, often controlled by computers or electronic controls. Advanced designs for feeding equipment, watering, and ventilation have improved the efficiency of production by enhancing the growing environment for the flocks.



Poultry industry workers breed, hatch, raise, process, and market poultry for meat or egg products.
Photo by CGP Staff

Work Performed

This complex industry consists of four major segments: hatcheries to produce chicks; farms that produce meat or eggs; processing plants that prepare and package meat; and marketing and sales departments that sell and distribute products to supermarkets, restaurants, and other customers.

Most poultry farmers obtain their chicks from hatcheries.

Hatchery owners or **supervisors** oversee activities of the workers and assign them to daily tasks. The owners monitor the equipment to keep the incubators at the correct temperature, humidity, and ventilation. They keep records on production, costs, supplies, orders, and equipment.

Hatchery workers place eggs in incubator trays and slide the trays into incubator racks. When the chicks start to hatch, they transfer them to chick boxes. Then they may determine the sex of the baby chicks, grade them, vaccinate them, or debeak them. (A growing practice is to inoculate the eggs with a vaccine before they hatch.) Workers may truck cartons of chicks to poultry farms.

Egg farmers raise poultry to produce table eggs. They select and buy chicks or receive them under contract from integrated companies. They may take the market risk and buy the chicks on their own. When they are about six months old, the pullets begin to lay eggs. Poultry producers sell the eggs to wholesalers and retailers.

Egg farm owners or **supervisors** assign jobs and direct workers. They see that the birds have adequate shelter, protection from disease, and food that produces maximum growth at minimum cost. Owners or supervisors inspect and dispose of infected poultry. They keep records on growth, feed, and egg production. They also arrange with wholesalers for the sale of eggs.

Broiler growers, who raise poultry for meat, do much the same work as that of egg producers. They obtain day-old chicks and raise them in broiler houses until they are about six weeks old and weigh about four and one-half pounds. They are then ready for the market. Meat producers also keep records on feed used and weight gains of poultry. Live poultry is shipped to processors, who kill and dress the birds.

Poultry workers feed birds, clean cages, and disinfect the houses in egg and broiler farms. They put vaccines in drinking water and watch for signs of disease. If the flock is being raised for meat, they may weigh the hens to determine if they are ready for market.

If the flock is laying eggs, workers in some small-scale egg farms gather eggs at least twice a day and store them in a cool place. They clean, inspect, and grade the eggs, keep records on the number and quality of the eggs, and pack the eggs in cartons. In larger egg farms, eggs tumble down onto conveyor belts. Machines then wash, sort, and pack the eggs into individual cartons. Workers place the cartons into boxes and stack the boxes onto pallets for shipment.

Few poultry farmers accept the entire risk of the marketplace themselves. Most growers and some egg farmers have a contract with a slaughterhouse or with a buyer of dressed poultry or eggs. Among workers who serve contract poultry farmers are **poultry field service technicians**. These specialists represent food processing companies or cooperative

associations. They inspect poultry farms to see that they meet the requirements on housing, equipment, sanitation, and efficiency.

Field service technicians may inspect chickens or turkeys for signs of disease and check their rate of growth. They talk to the farmers about new techniques, government rulings, and company standards. They may gather samples of feed or diet supplements and take them to a lab for testing.

Poultry processing workers slaughter, dress, and pack chickens or turkeys. **Hangers** suspend live poultry from a conveyor for killing, scalding, removal of feathers, and cleaning. **Picking machine tenders** operate a machine that scalds, removes feathers, and washes poultry. Primary processing workers operate machines that cut birds open, remove viscera (insides), and cut birds apart or debone the meat for further processing.

Secondary processing workers operate equipment that further processes the meat into products such as chopped and formed patties, or battered and breaded parts. **Poultry dressers** work in the packing and labeling department and operate machines that weigh, wrap, and prepare poultry for shipment or storage. They may pack meat in ice or load meat on racks for cold storage rooms.

Marketing and sales managers contact customers to negotiate prices and terms of delivery, and arrange for distribution. Finished chicken products are transported in refrigerated trucks from processing facilities to market outlets such as supermarkets, foodservice operations, distributors, and other market channels. Although most poultry farmers sell their products to food processing and food retailing companies, some cater directly to the public. They may set up roadside stands or sell at farmers' markets.

Working Conditions

The poultry industry has a wide range of working conditions. Workers for egg farms, meat farms, and processing plants do manual labor. Automated equipment such as feed mixers, feed conveyors, and manure scraping machines ease much of the work formerly done by hand.

Work may vary from a one-person job to assembly-line work with many people. Workers may find jobs in which they do the same task over and over, or they may do many jobs. Cleanliness is of the utmost importance. Workers in poultry meat and egg production must take care not to jeopardize the health of the flocks or the sanitation of the finished products.

The industry offers both indoor and outdoor work. Although processing workers work indoors, processing plants may be damp, cold, and noisy. Field service technicians do considerable traveling.

Hours and Earnings

Hours are often long, and work on Saturdays, Sundays, and holidays is common on poultry farms. Workers in processing plants usually work an eight-hour shift. On average, poultry slaughtering and processing workers are on the job for about 40 hours a week, but overtime is common.

Earnings in the poultry industry vary. They depend on the worker's job, education, number of years on the job, and the employer. Contract growers assume less risk but also may make less money than independent growers. Profits vary from year to year and depend on location, size and kind of farm, production costs, and the market for eggs and poultry meat. Family-run broiler operations are usually part of diversified farms that are often supplemented by non-farm income. An independent poultry farmer may operate at a loss one year and gross \$50,000 to \$75,000 or more the next year. Large commercial farms generally have higher profits.

According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, in 2002, wages for most workers on a commercial poultry farm or hatchery ranged from a low of around \$6 an hour to a high of over \$13 an hour. The average rate for poultry slaughtering and processing workers was roughly \$9 an hour. Poultry industry workers with jobs as supervisors earned an average of around \$37,000 a year. The average salary for field service technicians and other agricultural inspectors was about \$31,000 a year.

Most processing plants offer workers paid holidays, vacation, and sick leave, and health and life insurance. Most processing workers under union contract also receive pension plans. Some companies sponsor wellness centers to make healthcare more convenient for employees. Other poultry workers, however, rarely enjoy substantial benefits.

Education and Training

Most jobs in the poultry industry require workers with at least a high school diploma. Courses dealing with agriculture are useful. To learn poultry farming and production, workers can take a job on a poultry farm. Processing workers get on-the-job training.

Poultry farmers, field service technicians, and other management workers should have some formal education beyond high school. Land-grant and agricultural colleges offer programs of study in animal husbandry or animal science. There are about 34 programs in poultry science offered by colleges and universities in the United States.

Courses include agricultural mechanics and equipment, poultry science, nutrition, feeds and feeding, and animal husbandry techniques. Other studies cover meat animal products, poultry breeding, animal health, and farm management.

A familiarity with computers is important for large poultry operations. Poultry farmers must keep up with complex government regulations, the requirements of government tax rules, and the record keeping of poultry farming.

Unions and Professional Societies

Several groups represent the interests of the poultry industry through promotion, research, education, networking, and other services. The National Chicken Council and the U.S. Poultry & Egg Association, for instance, are dedicated to the growth, progress, and welfare of the poultry industry as a whole. The American Egg Board works to help egg producers fund and carry out proactive programs to increase markets for eggs, egg products, and spent fowl products. The United Egg Producers, with five regional co-ops, is the

largest trade group in the egg industry. Other groups include the National Turkey Federation, the Poultry Science Association, and the American Poultry Association.

Some workers in the processing of poultry belong to a union. The principal union for these workers is the United Food and Commercial Workers International Union. Other poultry workers, however, rarely belong to a union.

Personal Qualifications

Farm workers and processing workers should be strong and healthy. They should not be sensitive to strong odors or the sight of blood. Owners and supervisors should have the managerial skills to organize and operate their business. Field service technicians should have good communications skills in order to effectively talk with people, to teach and train them, and to write reports.

Occupations can be adapted for workers with disabilities. Persons should contact their school or employment counselors, their state office of vocational rehabilitation, or their state department of labor to explore fully their individual needs and requirements as well as the requirements of the occupation.

Where Employed

According to the National Chicken Council, roughly 300,000 people are employed in chicken processing plants nationwide. Another 60,000 are employed in feed mills, hatcheries, distribution centers, corporate headquarters, and other locations.

Currently, over 90 percent of all chickens raised for human consumption in the United States are produced by independent farmers working under contract with integrated chicken production and processing companies. Most of the other ten percent are company-owned farms, with less than one percent raised by individual growers.

According to the American Egg Board, there are 64 egg producing companies with 1 million plus chickens (called layers), and 11 companies with more than 5 million layers. About 260 egg producing companies have flocks of 75,000 or more hens, and represent roughly 95 percent of all the layers in the United States.

Poultry farms can be found throughout the country. The top ten egg producing states are, in order, Iowa, Ohio, Indiana, Pennsylvania, California, Texas, Nebraska, Florida, Georgia, and Minnesota. Broiler operations tend to be concentrated in the southeastern states. The top broiler chicken producing states include, in order, Georgia, Arkansas, Alabama, Mississippi, North Carolina, Texas, Maryland, Kentucky, Virginia, and Oklahoma. Turkey farms are largely concentrated in the Southeast, the North Central States, and California.

Hatcheries and processing plants follow the same pattern, with poultry processing plants often located in small cities and towns close to the farms that produce chickens. At present, the top 40 broiler companies in the country operate 169 slaughtering plants and 134 further processing operations.

Employment Outlook

Poultry has enjoyed over 30 years of sustained growth, despite increasing competition from alternatives. This growth

is expected to continue as long as the poultry industry continues to come up with convenience-oriented products. With the growing popularity of labor-intensive, ready-to-heat products, demand for poultry workers should remain firm. Successful marketing by the poultry industry will also likely continue to increase demand for chicken.

According to the National Chicken Council, the size of the poultry industry workforce has remained relatively stable. Although production increased over 60 percent during the 1990's, increased automation and other advances have allowed companies to produce more chicken products per worker. In addition to automation, genetic engineering, cross-breeding, more efficient feeds, new feed additives, and better disease control have all contributed to better production.

The poultry producing and processing industry, and the egg industry to a lesser extent, is also becoming much more concentrated in large operations. In fact, nearly all broiler growers are under contract with processing companies. The top ten chicken processing companies in the United States account for nearly 75 percent of the total chicken production in the country. These companies include Tyson Foods, Pilgrim's Pride, Gold Kist, Perdue Farms, and Wayne Farms.

In addition, there is a greater trend toward preparing case-ready meat and poultry at the processing level. This has led to an increase in poultry cooperatives merging with meat-packing and processing firms. Meat packers are expanding into poultry, and poultry processors are moving into the processing of red meat. Both industries are also marketing fish products.

Entry Methods

Those interested in jobs in the poultry industry can look for work at poultry farms and poultry processing plants. There may be listings in newspaper employment sections or at local Departments of Labor. Part-time work on a farm or in a plant will help those still in high school or college prepare for a career in the field. A 4-H club or a branch of the Future Farmers of America can offer experience, training, and tips on work or study. Graduates of an agricultural college or land-grant college may find work through the college career services office.

Advancement

Promotions are based on skill, education, knowledge, and time on the job. Unskilled workers can get work on poultry farms and in processing plants. After a while, they may become graders, inspectors, haulers, or supervisors. Those who want to advance in this industry should plan to get more formal education. Those who obtain a poultry science degree may fill technical and management positions in bird production, processing, business, research, or education. They may become field service technicians, buyers, or contractors for a large cooperative.

For Further Research

American Egg Board, 1460 Renaissance Drive, Park Ridge, IL 60068. Web site: www.aeb.org

National Chicken Council, 1015 Fifteenth Street, N.W., Suite 930, Washington, DC 20005-2605. Web site: www.nationalchickencouncil.com or www.eatchicken.com

National Turkey Federation, 1225 New York Avenue, N.W., Suite 400, Washington, DC 20005. Web site: www.eatturkey.com

U.S. Poultry & Egg Association, 1530 Cooledge Road, Tucker, GA 30084-7303. Web site: www.poultryegg.org

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