

FIVE THINGS I LEARNED ON A TOUR OF A MEAT CHICKEN FARM



By Guest Blogger Annabel Selby-Jones, ACMF Communications Manager

The Australian meat chicken farming industry is one that has been tainted by some long-standing myths and misperceptions, so when the chance came to see things for myself, I jumped at it. Being new to the industry, I had my own perceptions, and I was keen to see if my perceptions matched reality. Here are five things I learned on my tour of one of Australia's largest poultry operations.

Chickens are cheeky!

Yes, meat chickens are reared in large industrial barns (for their own health and safety), but they certainly aren't complaining. Some birds were chilled out, either hanging on a perch, resting on the floor, or meandering about, but I loved the cheekier ones playing chasings, scratching up the fresh litter (dust bathing), foraging around and being really quite social. Some were even brave enough to wander over and take a closer look at their visitors.



Australian meat chickens dust bathing

Chickens chat

There was a calming, almost 'cooing' sound in the chicken sheds we visited. The farm manager said that even outside the shed, he can tell how the chickens are feeling by listening to the way they sound. If they are too quiet, they are probably cold. If they are noisy, something is upsetting them. Take a listen for yourself and see if you can pick up the difference in this [past blog](#).



A farm manager checking his meat chicken flock

Chickens give off other clues as to their health and wellbeing, such as reducing their water intake and not moving around as much if they aren't feeling at their best. The feed, water, temperature etc in the sheds are closely monitored by computer, but ultimately the farm manager uses his eyes and ears to work out if all is well in the chook house - listening to how the birds are communicating and monitoring their behaviour - continually on the lookout for departures from the norm that might signal that something's not quite right, so they can respond accordingly.

Surprisingly, the chooks are more intelligent than I gave them credit for. The farm manager explained a few behaviours, including how the chickens know that it's nearly their bedtime when the lights start dimming, and they react by quickly helping themselves to 'supper' to ensure they're not

hungry during the night.

Technology is on the rise

While robofarmers are still a thing of science fiction, I was impressed by how much technology has enhanced the production process – from the hatchery, rearing farms and right through to processing, packing and re-purposing the small amount of waste that the industry produces.

At the hatchery level, a light intensity sensor is used to detect unfertilised eggs and infertile ones are robotically removed, and the rest vaccinated (even before the chicks are hatched!). Incubation, hatching and counting are all done en masse via full automation. Amazingly I didn't even see a broken or even a cracked egg!



Utilising technology to sort and count fertilised eggs

On the farms, the climate inside each barn is set to mimic the chicken's preferred environment, which is continually changing according to their age, with light, temperature, humidity, feed and water all closely monitored by computer to ensure optimal rearing conditions. The computer also responds by automatically directing the shed equipment to adjust the environment in the shed if the temperature etc deviates from optimal, and it also sends alerts to the farm manager's phone if there is a potential problem, like water consumption is outside the set range, or if there is any equipment malfunction, so that the manager can immediately respond.

The processing plants are another thing again. The automated processing machinery was impressive in terms of skill, speed and accuracy. Technology is utilised to sort, class, weigh, debone, pack, stack, wrap and load kilos and kilos of chicken meat each hour so Australia's strong appetite for chicken meat can be met.

Reduce, Reuse, Recycle - It's a really sustainable industry



Solar panels at an Australian chicken meat farm

I already knew that chicken meat has the [lowest environmental footprint](#) of any meat because chickens are highly efficient converters of feed into meat, but I didn't realise the efficiencies that are apparent across the whole production cycle. 80 per cent of the live chicken ends up in chicken meat products for human consumption, including parts such as the feet, which have a solid domestic market in Australia given their use in Asian cuisine, and the heart – which apparently is 'gold' in some cultures. Other inedible parts of the chicken, including the feathers, are ground up and used by Australia's petfood industry, ensuring that the nutrients aren't wasted.

Water used in the processing plants is piped to nearby wastewater ponds where the methane generated is captured and returned for use in the processing plant to replace a portion of the gas requirements of the facility. The water remaining is cleaned and used for irrigation purposes.

The sustainability of the chicken meat industry has been confirmed in a [report](#) by AgriFutures Australia, which found that commercial meat chicken production is the most environmentally sustainable system to produce land-based animal protein.

More and more farms like the ones I visited are adopting the use of solar panels to help reduce their environmental footprint, again contributing to the good position industry is in with regards to environmental sustainability.

'The end' wasn't as bad as I thought it was going to be

This is the part of the tour that I wasn't looking forward to. I knew that the chickens were stunned before being slaughtered, so it was going to be a fairly serene procedure, but I didn't know how I'd feel witnessing the process. Or how the birds would be before their last hurrah.

Thankfully, my fears were not realised. Incredibly, the birds awaiting were really calm – just sitting quietly in their crates. In fact, throughout the whole industry tour of the hatchery, rearing farms and

processing plant, I was struck by just how calm and relaxed the birds were.

Sure, the actual processing part wasn't pretty if you thought too much about it, but in the end, my overall perception is that chickens actually live a pretty good life – no stresses about finding food or water, no stresses about escaping predators, like-minded chooks surrounding them throughout their life, and as far as they are aware, a quick and pain free end to life.

You might consider me biased, but I was pleasantly surprised by the whole tour. With the advent of COVID and other biosecurity concerns, the industry hasn't been able to run as many tours as we'd have liked, but we're looking into developing virtual tours so more people can see how the Australian chicken meat farming system operates.

Here are a few other happy snaps that we took along the way...



A freshly hatched chick



The ACMF team gearing up in their biosecurity gear - necessary for the birds' protection, not ours!



The interior of a chicken barn housing 21-day old birds