

WATER QUALITY, AGRICULTURE AND RURAL DEVELOPMENT IN NORTH GEORGIA

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INTRODUCTION

Chickens and eggs play an important part in Georgia's economy. Broilers are the state's top cash crop, accounting for 1.17 billion in cash receipts and 30.0 percent of state totals as reported in the 1990 Agricultural Department report on commodities.

The poultry industry is a vital part of the economy in North Georgia and is now spreading to other parts of the state. The poultry farmers and the poultry integrators have developed a working partnership that has been good for the farmers by providing them with a higher farm income and good for the state as well because of the many agricultural jobs that poultry supports.

Through this farmer/integrator partnership, and with support from the universities, various USDA agencies and research institutes, the poultry industry has maintained a leadership role in adopting new technologies that protect the environment while they produce a product that is economical and wholesome.

Under today's environmental constraints, good manure management practices are essential. The industry realizes that changes are taking place in the rural area population and the old methods of disposal for manure and poultry mortality may not be acceptable to neighbors and it may not always meet water quality standards.

Efforts are already underway in Georgia to test and demonstrate alternative methods that are more environmentally acceptable. Many producers and industry leaders are finding that composting offers an alternative method of utilizing large quantities of poultry manure, in an efficient and nonpolluting manner, as an organic soil amendment. Through the efforts of the Limestone Valley RC&D in West Georgia and the Chestatee-Chattahoochee RC&D in Northeast Georgia, a composting demonstration effort has been going on for the past two years. A number of contract growers have been involved along with their poultry companies. Studies are currently underway with the University of Georgia and USDA-ARS to evaluate the composted materials as an organic fertilizer and compare effects on water quality.

Farmers, in cooperation with the Georgia Department of Agriculture, also are trying composting as an alternative for disposal of dead birds. The current methods call for

incineration or disposal pits to be used. Composting the dead carcass produces an organic humus to be spread on the land and appears to be more environmentally correct than placing them in a hole in the ground or burning them. The Georgia Department of Agriculture should be consulted prior to the start-up of any composting on the farm.

Many local governments are faced with the problem of waste disposal. It is estimated that 25% of the volume of waste handled by these counties is paper. The poultry industry is making a contribution in this area also. A joint effort between the industry, the business community, local units of government and the Resource Conservation and Development Council has developed a "low density fiber bedding" for chickens made from waste paper and phone books. This bedding is used by the growers as an alternative to wood shavings and in tests performs as good or better than shavings. Currently there is one plant in Georgia capable of producing about 7 million pounds of bedding. This is a good example of how the poultry industry is working to protect the environment.