

WHAT ELSE GOES ON BEHIND THE SCENES OF OUR EGG SUPPLY CHAIN

The EFA's CEO Melinda Hashimoto and University of New England poultry researcher Dr Peta Taylor, reflect on what it takes behind the scenes to keep Australia's egg farming sector going.



Melinda Hashimoto



Dr Peta Taylor

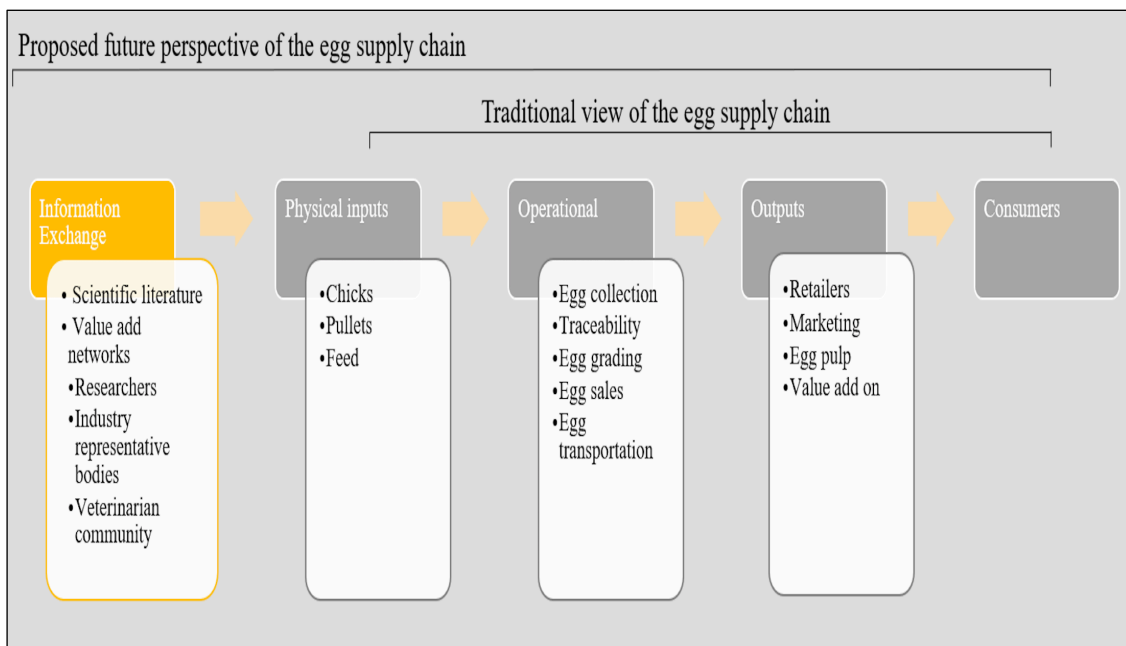
Australian egg farmers produce 17.9 million eggs every day to meet the consumer demand of approximately 247 eggs per person each year.

But present-day consumers demand more of their egg farmers than ever with environment, hen welfare, food safety and economics at the forefront of their demands.

The traditional view of the egg supply chain to many farmers commences with inputs. These include day old chicks, pullets and feed. The next step is production resulting in eggs produced, graded and packed. The final step is delivery to the consumer.

This is a simple outline of the egg supply chain that can be even more simply broken down to farmers, processing for those that make egg pulp or value add products, retailers or direct marketing to suppliers then consumers.

This traditional view of the Australian egg supply chain promotes over 3800 jobs. However, we argue there are more individuals that contribute to the success and development of the Australian egg industry, which challenges the traditional view of the egg supply chain.



The reality is that the next generation of egg farmers have so much more to consider than the traditional inputs and outputs. Now, in addition to traditional information carriers such as machinery providers and truck drivers, there are so many more people within the egg industry that can support businesses and the future of the egg industry through a holistic approach.

Agriculture is a highly technical, innovative and adaptive industry. However, future challenges experienced by current and new generation egg and poultry producers will require further innovation, collaboration and a new perspective to the 'egg supply chain'.

Our industry can no longer be siloed by occupation, age, location or size of enterprise, rather it needs to become stronger with the value-add networks available through industry representative bodies, researchers, nutritionists and veterinarians. Active engagement through bidirectional relationships will ensure continual improvement of skills and knowledge.

Veterinarians

Most medium sized egg farmers have a veterinarian that they call on and larger businesses often have full time veterinarians. There is a direct relationship, but the inclusion of the vet community is one that needs to be considered.

If a disease is found in a particular area, the local vet clinic is the first to receive sick

birds and are rarely made aware of outbreaks due to the way in which government shares information. Interactions with veterinary communities are important due to developing issues that may require specialist knowledge or first-hand experience with a particular disease.

Stockfeed and grain handling establishments are also an important part of the egg industry network.

Researchers

Researchers assist in building on the current information known to provide information on further developments relating to husbandry and ever-changing farming practices.

Again, a farm may have a relationship with a researcher but more and more they need to take time to read the literature that is developed in order to stay at the cutting edge.

"Researchers that have a variety of industry sources ensure a richer, deeper understanding, of issues often across small, medium and large enterprises. A longer time spent focusing on the needs or improvement on farm will result in greater uptake of the research outcomes on farm."

Industry Representative bodies

Egg Farmers of Australia (EFA) advocate for the industry with Government, Australian Eggs are focused on research and marketing and State Farming Organisations have a role in providing policy through to the national industry development organisation (EFA).

Egg Farmers of Australia aim to facilitate networks such as our vet section in our newsletter and we look to broadening this further to other specialists in the industry. We also have an egg industry youth reference group open to all members across the industry.

Egg Farmers of Australia work hand in hand with Australian eggs on important issues that cross our organisations and meet and speak regularly.

Information exchange is possible, and we are always willing to point egg industry supporters in the right direction if they need assistance.

Business Plan

All professional companies have a business plan, no longer can this simply include elements such as market analysis, machinery requirements and upgrades, husbandry accreditations, organisational chart, marketing and sales, financial projections including cost and revenue streams.

To get a competitive advantage, business must focus on their business plan ensuring that they include elements around networking such as being a part of egg industry groups and representative organisations to gain information, understanding the information researchers are producing and this can be difficult when there is not a full catalogue available. It is easy though for farmers to have key websites and set alerts and to enjoy reading poultry publications, such as Poultry Digest.

Increasing information exchange

It is true that some research is behind paywalls or may be difficult to understand due to scientific wording but if this is of interest, then there are always avenues to speak with people involved in the research. Increasing information exchange is important.

A traditional way of understanding more in a modern setting is through industry forums and catch ups, where discussion and information can be exchanged. It can sometimes be overwhelming to receive vast amounts of information via email.

Involvement through industry meetings or at the very least understanding the work that industry representative bodies are undertaking can lead to new thinking on your farm or in your work as an egg industry participant.

Farmers can think about issues from various angles such as how can researchers/industry representative bodies/government tackle this issue? Our network of vets are dealing with an increasing load of disease challenges domestically and working to understand every changing global risks and work to be proactive.

Education

As a former teacher, I believe education of the general public around the egg industry starts with teachers and the children they teach. We can't expect to recruit huge numbers of graduates to the egg industry if we don't start when children are small understanding about egg production. Biosecurity has made it more difficult to have classes of children visit farms or have viewing platforms but it is important to

tell our story engaging local farmers with local areas.

Unless people go onto a website, due to biosecurity concerns they don't experience egg farmers. Often a farm retreat with backyard hens is their only experience and it therefore makes it difficult for children to understand commercial egg farming and the volume of eggs produced to provide them with a bacon and egg roll.

Your experience as a researcher

Educating university students about the cognitive capacity of laying hens has shown to increase positive perceptions of hens (see Hazel et al., 2015).

A collaborative effort between Poultry Hub Australia and the University of New England, introduced a first-year practical based on the study developed by Dr Susan Hazel at the University of Adelaide, with the aim to engage students with the poultry industry and change perceptions from "bird brained" creatures to complex sentient individuals. Indeed, we see a significant increase in the proportion of students that 'like chickens' (9% increase), think they are 'intelligent' (15% increase) and are capable of experiencing various affective states (5-20% increase).

The educational experience exposes students to the possibility of working with hens through careers in the egg industry, poultry research and veterinary science and subsequently growing the capacity of the industry networks with new, passionate, educated people.

Conclusion

Egg farmers are encouraged to expand their perspective on the egg supply chain and make use of collaborative relationships between producers, scientific, industry bodies and veterinary communities.

Networking and information exchange must be a part of business plans and then put into practice. Breaking down these silos will help new generation farmers meet the challenges that face farming in the future with innovative collaborative developments of the egg industry.

Melinda Hashimoto - CEO Egg Farmers of Australia

Dr Peta Taylor - University of New England Poultry Researcher