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Biological Training for Poultry Flock Advisors: Training the Trainer

Joseph B. Hess

Alabama Cooperative Extension, jhes@acesag.auburn.edu

Michael K. Eckman

Alabama Cooperative Extension System



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Biological Training for Poultry Flock Advisors: Training the Trainer

Abstract

Continuing training of poultry flock advisors is an important effort of many Extension specialists and agents in areas having significant poultry industries. The programs discussed in this article describe unique efforts to deliver training on a company-by-company basis. Collaborative efforts by industry, allied industry, and Extension personnel produced programs that were well received by the broiler industry nationally.

Joseph B. Hess

Internet Address: jhess@acesag.auburn.edu

Michael K. Eckman

Department of Poultry Science
Alabama Cooperative Extension System
Auburn University, Alabama

Introduction

Most companies involved in poultry production have adopted vertical integration of production and distribution functions. In many cases, actual on-farm husbandry is contracted with an independent farmer, with the poultry company providing birds, feed, and technical support. Poultry companies employ technical specialists called "flock advisors" to visit contract farms to provide assistance with farm management. Advisors are selected from those holding BS degrees in agricultural disciplines or from the public at large.

Poultry flock advisors must have well-developed managerial skills in addition to possessing sufficient technical information to trouble shoot field problems. Continuing training is provided by technical meetings arranged primarily through state poultry associations and Extension efforts. These gatherings tend to be large, multi-company affairs that, although useful, do not foster intensive biological training.

Additional training efforts have been aimed at reaching single complexes (business groups) individually. Advantages of this approach include frank discussions of local problems not possible in a multi-company setting and opportunities for intensive training that may include hands-on lessons. Disadvantages include increased delivery costs to an Extension program associated with taking a program to multiple units and increased travel loads to the Extension specialists and agents involved.

Biological Training Course

In 1993, discussions between a large broiler producer and an allied industry supplier led to the creation of a biological refresher course in conjunction with Extension specialists in the Poultry Science Department at Auburn. This 1.5-day course was designed to review basic poultry biological principles as they relate to broiler production. Participants included broiler flock advisors, breeder flock advisors, feed mill managers and upper management (broiler managers, live production managers and complex managers).

Emphasis centered on describing why birds respond as they do to environment and management rather than training in the mechanical management of poultry houses and environment. One day of classroom teaching was followed by a half day of hands-on viewing of poultry dissection

techniques and poultry coccidial lesions in birds inoculated with cocci prior to the course.

A range of biological topics was reviewed by Extension specialists from Auburn and veterinarians from the allied company. Topics covered included:

- Biological principles in general,
- Unique aspects of the avian species,
- Disease agents and infectious causes,
- Nutritional principles, and
- Management concepts.

A wrap-up session at the conclusion of the course allowed flock advisors to discuss unique situations within their complex as they relate to the course materials. A course manual was delivered to each participant that contained a synopsis of each speaker's slides.

Courses were held both at Auburn University's Poultry Research Farm and at individual complexes, depending on the wishes of the individual complexes involved. Costs of food and materials for the course were borne by the allied company. Course materials were delivered to 23 complexes representing eight companies in seven states. Over 500 individuals attended this course, representing in the neighborhood of 12,000 broiler growers with a weekly output of 22 million birds. Production from these operations represents approximately 14% of U.S. broiler production.

It was hoped that flock advisors completing this course would be better prepared to evaluate field situations in regards to fundamental biological principles. In addition, flock advisors would be better able to field questions from contract farmers on why individual management practices were necessary for improved bird health or productivity.

Phase II Course

Interest in the original course sparked plans for a follow-up course to be delivered to the same complexes. Planning began in early 1995 for an abbreviated 1-day course to review biological principles and challenge participants with field scenario problem solving exercises. The biological review revisited avian biology and nutrition as they relate to poultry production to prime participants for the problem-solving activities included in the program. Classroom instruction was held to less than half the session to leave ample time for group activities.

The problem-solving portion of this program used individual farm field data from the records of the complex being visited. Farm descriptions and production results from several years of broiler growouts for an individual farm (farm identities were not revealed) were reviewed by teams of two to three flock advisors to identify potential opportunities for improvement based on the biological principles discussed in the course. Following deliberations (generally 1 hour), one member of the team was required to present a synopsis of the teams findings. Acetate sheets and permanent markers were provided for the preparation of overheads to display findings.

A resource manual was produced in support of this course that provided background information with references for frequently discussed management topics. Manuals were delivered to each participant and were used in reviewing the problem-solving case studies used. Intentions were to provide a long-term reference in support of flock advisor's efforts to inform farmers. Topics covered in the manual included:

- Chick quality,
- Feed and water quality,
- Health programs,
- Avian biology, and
- Broiler management.

Individual subjects from this manual were released as popular press supplements in eight issues of the Watt publication *Poultry Digest* over a 2-year period. This extended coverage allowed the authors to reach a greater portion of the poultry industry than could be reached through on-site visits alone.

Conclusions

The programs presented in this series were unique in several respects. First, individual complexes were handled separately to allow for more open conversations about local management issues. Smaller groups allowed for enhanced input from participants in terms of discussion and problem solving activities.

Second, a unique partnership between the poultry industry, an allied industry supplier, and Auburn University allowed Extension personnel unprecedented access to operations on a national scale. In addition, each partner brought expertise to the table, particularly in the planning process, which improved the overall viability of the project. Costs for implementing a complex-by-complex program on a national scale were high, and support of an allied company for this project allowed us to do much more than we would have accomplished alone.

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