

Slightly Greater Egg Output Indicated

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Egg production only slightly larger next winter than this winter is indicated by farmers' expressed intentions in February to raise six per cent more replacement chickens this spring.

Turkey output about the same size as in the last half of 1957 had been indicated by growers in January.

The chickens raised intentions would lift the number to about

420 million from the 394 million of 1957.

Intentions are not positive indications of actual production but in the past they have been sufficiently good indications of trend to deserve respect. In fact, one reason why the USDA compiles intentions reports is to give farmers a chance to reconsider their production plans if this seems advisable to them after they discover what other farmers plan.

This article, therefore, will consider probable developments if these intentions are carried out and will compare the season's developments to date with the expressed intentions.

First, how do the intended increases in chickens raised divide regionally?

The increases range from three per cent more in the North Atlantic states to 14 per cent more in the South Central group. Other intended increases are Western states, four per cent; North Central, five per cent, and South Atlantic states, six per cent.

These changes would be from a 1957 level which, for the nation, was the lowest in the 34 years during which such estimates have been made. But for several reasons, the 394 million chickens raised in 1957—18 per cent fewer than in 1955—didn't result in a proportionately reduced egg production.

First, of these chickens raised, more were sexed pullets than in any previous year and farmers intend 61 per cent of their 1958 chick purchases (excluding broilers) to be sexed pullets, compared with 60 per cent last year and 30 per cent 10 years ago.

Second, the year-to-year changes in the number of pullets available as layers can be partially offset by changes in the number of hens kept over for a second laying year. Usually about half of the pullet layers are retained as hens for this purpose. But the proportion can be altered enough to noticeably smooth out the variations that you would expect as a consequence of changes in the numbers of chickens raised.

Right now, the laying flock contains an unusually large proportion of hens. Because they will be moved out of the flock this summer and fall, the total laying flock at the end of 1958 won't be increased above the year earlier by the same extent that chickens raised are increased in 1958.

Finally, the rate of egg production per bird seems to go up each year. In recent years, it has increased at about the same percentage as the increase in population. Consequently, so long as this trend continues, an egg-laying flock of static size would suffice to provide a steady annual per capita egg supply.

The net result of all these influences, if the farmers stick to their intentions to raise six per cent more chickens, would likely be to provide a Jan. 1, 1959, laying

flock about the same size as the 321 million layers on hand this Jan. 1.

A larger proportion of next season's flock will be pullets and a smaller proportion will be hens, compared with this winter. They will likely lay at a higher average rate per bird than this year's flock, particularly in the fall of 1958.

As a result, egg supply per person in the fall may be slightly larger than in 1957. All this is based on the assumption that farmers will stick close to their intended six per cent increase.

So far, however, the monthly hatchings of replacement chicks are running more than six per cent ahead of last year. January hatchings of egg-type birds were 11 per cent greater than last January and eggs in incubators this Feb. 1 were 10 per cent greater than last year January and February provided about 16 per cent of the total 1957 hatch of replacement chicks, so the season is far from "made" by hatchings in the first two months.

Certainly it is clear, however, that the important hatching months of March and April cannot show equal percentage increases with January and February if the earlier relatively favorable egg price outlook for fall is to be maintained.

The intention to raise one per cent more turkeys, with the increase solely among the Bronze birds, seems to run counter to hatchery and related activity in recent months.

Recent hatchery operations and other indications have not been consistent with a one per cent increase from 1957's record 806 million turkeys. Turkey breeder hens on hand Jan. 1, 1958, were seven per cent fewer than a year earlier. Pullorum testings since July 1, 1957, have been 10 per cent fewer.

Hatchings from Sept. 1, 1957, through January have been 26 per cent fewer. Eggs in incubators Feb. 1 were 10 per cent fewer.

All these, however, are only early season indications, which can be changed. Last season the poults hatched before the end of February were only 19 per cent of the season's hatch.

Furthermore, early-season operations in 1957 were on a grand scale, which tapered down sharply before the hatching season ended.

Maybe 1958 is proceeding on a more nearly "normal" seasonal pattern. In comparison with the year before, it may show the reduction in early-season poults to be compensated by an increase in later hatchings. Late 1958 prices are unlikely to exceed 1957 prices if this is the case.

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