Careful Management Pulled Them Through Local Marek's Disaster

Wengers of Stevens RD1 Convert Floor Pullet House to Cages

The Daniel E Wengers, Stevens RD1, believe that the very best care they can give is what it takes to get along in the local poultry industry

At 45, Wenger is a veteran pullet producer who survived the Marek's disease disaster in Southeastern Pennsylvania - an accomplishment which speaks for itself to knowledgable area industrymen

Wenger kept on producing pullets locally at a time when most local egg producers went south to areas like Georgia for their laying flocks

Now, Marek's has been solved with a new vaccine and Wenger has nearly tripled the size of his flock by converting to an automated cage system.

In the same building in which he produced13,000 pullets in a floor operation for the past eight years, he has just completed growing his first 35,000 flock of caged pullets. The pullets are moving out this weekend as replacement stock for the Plain and Fancy Egg Ranch, Inc , Elizabethtown RD3, managed by Claude Hess.

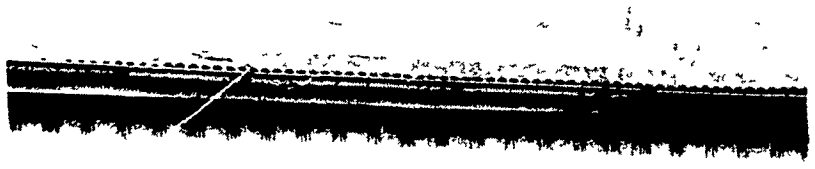
Hess had previously bought several flocks from Wenger and liked the quality of birds he got. It was eggs from the Wenger flock which took several top awards for Plan and Fancy at the Farm Show this year

In showing the flock early this week, Hess emphasized the uniform size and appearance of the birds produced by Wenger, as well as their thrify appearance. He said eggs from these birds also are uniform and superior in quality.

One of the keys to Wenger's success has been his ability to keep disease out of his flocks. He was able to maintain a good record on disease control even during the period since 1963 when most Southeastern Pennsylvania pullet producers were forced by Marek's to turn to other occupations.

This is the automatic equipment which feeds the birds at the Wenger poultry farm. A major concern with such a large number of birds under automatic feeding, watering, heating and ventilation is what to do in the event of a power breakdown. Wenger has a reserve power system which is designed to start automatically if power fails. He checks the stand-by system frequently to make sure it works.

Simplicity itself and a minimum of labor are the keys to Wenger's manure disposal syste. This covering at the ceiling of his manure catching area is removed and the manure pushed by power driven scrapers through the opening into a waiting wagon.



Wenger chats with Elwood Chronister, right, Windsor RD1. Chronister is considering converting his 16,000 bird floor operation to a 40,000 pullet cage operation. In the background at one end of Wenger's pullet house is the entrance to his manure catching area. The automatic scrappers push the manure through a hole in the roof to a wagon.

In keeping his flocks disease free, Wenger follows a program of completely washing down and sanitizing his building after each flock.

He also takes strict precautions to keep all birds and animals away from his pullets. For instance, he installs fine wire around all his vents to make sure birds can't enter.

He's equally concerned about visitors who might carry disease into the building and while the flock is growing visitors aren't welcome in the chicken house. This article was held up, for instance,until the flock was ready to move out.

Under the new cage system, manure is scraped out by a pulley system through a hole in the floor to a waiting wagon and hauled away every two weeks. This stops the build-up of ammonia.

Hess thinks this is one of the key reasons for Wenger's success. He thinks ammonia is very harmful to birds.

Looking back to the days when Marek's was prevalent, Hess noted that he once bought a flock that had had 40 per cent mortality as pullets and had another 40 per cent mortality before their laying career was ended. He emphasized that these birds were from "a good grower."

Wenger's worst set-back in the past eight years was about12 per cent mortality. But he usually grew out 98 per cent or better.

Hess thinks that Marek's was probably around before 1963 but it "really flourished when we started bringing together these large concentrations of birds." When local buyers "saw it was critical, they just scattered and went to other states to buy birds."

Hess thinks that one reason Wenger escaped Marek's disasters was that his farm is located among the trees and hills between the Circle—T Ranch and the Pennsylvania Turnpike. Marek's is primarily air transmitted and apparently didn't reach the Wenger farm. but Wenger's care and management was also an important factor.

Now that Marek's - "the only real problem we had in growing pullets," according to Hess - has been brought under control, Hess sees a bright future for pullet production in this area.

It was at the instence of Hess that Wenger converted his 40 by 400 foot pullet building to a cage operation last year. Hess helped Wenger in getting the new operation going and even agreed to take a flock at 14 weeks instead of the usual 20 weeks in order that Wenger wouldn't miss much production time. Wenger assembled all the equipment and was ready to go with the installation when the flock was moved. He converted the building in eight weeks.

Marek's isn't the only disease that Wenger keeps under control. "I haven't spent $200 for medication for the last four flocks," he stated.

Hess thinks it will be even easier to control disease with the cage system. He also noted they can't crowd and smother in the cages which have 23 birds per cage. In addition, there's more uniform size and health, which Hess thinks results in a more uniform and high quality egg.

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Mr. and Mrs. Daniel E. Wenger, Stevens RD1, are shown this week with their new cage poultry system. At upper left is a gas space heater, one of several which provide heat for the building.