

Case study

Enhanced bird health results in premium woodland produce

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Tree planting scheme helps to enrich the outdoor environment for chickens, resulting in improved animal welfare and secures a market for premium free range



Poultry farmer Les Heywood has farmed at Hollyfield Farm in Devon for ten years. With a strong aspiration to develop new farming and land management methods to increase sustainability and the viability of future production, Les has incorporated trees on his seven

hectare farm. This has created a better environment for his birds and enabled his customers to benefit from marketing high quality, sought-after woodland poultry products.

Improving sustainability and meeting demand

Since creating the farm, Les has proactively made changes to combat the main environmental issues he faced. Energy usage was of particular concern, with Les overseeing the conversion of all heating from liquid petroleum gas (LPG) to biomass boilers to heat his poultry houses. In addition, he also introduced a wind turbine to generate his own electricity, and received help from the Catchment Sensitive Farming programme run by Natural England to concrete yard areas to help prevent water pollution.

Since 2007, Les has also undertaken tree planting on his farm's ranges after making the move to producing free range woodland chickens. The planting took place in response to market demands from his retail customers, as well as the benefits that trees brought in relation to bird health and protection, which was a big priority for the farm. Explaining his decision, Les said, "We quickly realised that tree planting was the best way to produce high quality free range chickens, as it encourages them to use the entire range while being protected and sheltered."

Health improvements and range enrichment

With help from the Woodland Trust, Les undertook a substantial amount of additional tree planting in 2014. A total of 1,550 trees were incorporated across all ranging areas, comprising 13 different species including beech, oak, alder and silver birch. In addition, shrub species such as hazel, hawthorn, dogwood, spindle and alder blackthorn were also planted nearer to the poultry houses to provide low level shelter in the first instance. These were planted in such a way to create a protective corridor, linking the poultry houses to the small clusters of woodland situated further out in the ranging areas.

Since planting, Les has seen noticeable changes in the behaviour and welfare of his flock. The trees encourage



Les Heywood has used tree planting to help his farm in a number of ways.

Trees can:

- Provide shelter and protection for chickens which encourages them to range further and exhibit natural behaviours.
- Improve the health and wellbeing of the chickens as a result of ranging, providing a positive impact on the quality and quantity of chickens finished.
- Help secure a premium price and meet free-range standards set by retail customers such as Sainsbury's.
- Improve the biodiversity of the range with owls, voles and hedgehogs now established on the land.
- As the trees grow and develop, wood can be taken from the trees which will then be used as an energy source.

The Woodland Trust receives funding for the integration of trees on farms from the PUR project which is funded by the hotel chain Accor who support reforestation and agroforestry projects across the world.

the birds to exhibit natural behaviours in the woodland, as they feel more relaxed in an environment they are naturally and historically attuned to. Speaking of the improvements in health, Les said, "It encourages the birds to display their natural roaming instincts which is great to see, and it also demonstrates to the public that woodland chicken is a more natural and higher-welfare product."

Proper planning

All the trees on Les's farm were planted to suit his land type and location, with the Woodland Trust providing a bespoke

"Tree planting encourages our free range chickens to use the entire range as there is plenty of shelter and protection. This produces healthier chickens for market, and has a positive impact on our business."

Les Heywood, poultry farmer, Devon.

tree planting plan. This has allowed Les to effectively distribute the different tree species on areas of the ranges where they are most likely to thrive and provide the greatest benefits to his chickens and the farm overall. Les explains, "The Woodland Trust helped me with the location and types of trees to plant. Their knowledge and advice was vital in ensuring that we maximised the benefits of tree planting in the range areas, and what trees would be most suitable on the land."

Following his experience, Les is keen to recommend the tree planting to other farmers, particularly those looking to produce free-range chickens. He comments, "Poultry farmers will often have a dedicated range to produce free range chickens, so it makes absolute sense to look into tree planting to help produce healthier free range chickens."



Ware Anthony Rust



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Ware Anthony Rust

Improved biodiversity

In addition to the positive commercial impact of tree planting, Les has also witnessed environmental improvements on his farmland. The tree planting has improved the biodiversity and natural wildlife of the ranging areas, with owls, voles and hedgehogs now becoming frequent sights on his land.

Future plans

As the site develops and the trees become more established, Les is eager to showcase his farm and what has been achieved in relation to tree planting and woodland management. In particular, following the installation of the biomass boiler and once the trees are suitably established, he is especially keen to use wood coppiced from his trees as a sustainable way to continually heat his farm buildings and poultry houses. Going forward, he plans to continue working with the Woodland Trust for further advice and practical guidance. "The Trust has been pivotal in helping me plant the trees, and providing me with access to such valuable funding. Every farm is different, so such bespoke knowledge and advice from experts like those at the Trust is vital, as it is often the lack of knowledge that puts many farmers off."