Trees mean better business

One of the best returns on investment in farming, says leading egg producer

David Brass, CEO of The Lakes Free Range Egg Company, is a recognised advocate of tree planting as an active part of farm management. Having started tree planting trial schemes on his family farm in 1997, he has come to appreciate the commercial and welfare benefits that trees deliver. At least 20 per cent of all The Lakes Free Range Egg Company ranging areas are now tree-planted, and any other farm supplying eggs to the firm must meet the same requirement.

Planting helps production

As part of the McDonald's Sustainable Egg Supply group, David worked closely with researcher Ashleigh Bright from FAI Farms Ltd to determine the effects that tree cover had on free range flocks. Their report, published in the Veterinary Record in 2012, compared 33 flocks with tree cover to 33 without. It showed that chickens with tree cover produced eggs with better shell quality and reduced 'seconds' during collection and packing.

With a second egg worth around 30 per cent less than a Grade A egg, the research suggested that a one per cent decrease in both packing seconds and farm seconds across a flock of 10,000 birds would result in approximately 4,800 eggs being classed as Grade A.

The experience of The Lakes Free Range Egg Company supports this. David comments, "The cost benefit of tree planting is one of the best in farming. It costs us about £2,000 per hectare to plant trees, but this immediately improves the proportion of Grade A eggs produced by at least two per cent, meaning that we achieve payback in just six months."

> "Why should tree planting be a priority? Because if you have 64,000 birds it is going to make you £20,000 a year more money. That's harsh, but not everyone is altruistic. All of a sudden it is the sensible thing to do."
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> **David Brass, CEO of The Lakes Free Range Egg Company**

Premium product

As a significant supplier to McDonald's and, more recently, Sainsbury's, The Lakes Free Range Egg Company has to meet ever stricter requirements for animal welfare. In 2007, McDonald's launched its range enrichment programme, which required all producers supplying them to plant trees on the laying hen ranges. This involved working closely with David on research and initial planting.

In November 2013, David secured a deal with Sainsbury's who strongly champion woodland as a premium product. The deal created an extremely beneficial relationship between The Lakes Free Range Egg Company, Sainsbury's and the Woodland Trust, with learning in all directions. "All parties are enjoying the relationship", says David, "and contributing something different to it. It is great to have a new opportunity to learn."

The Lakes Free Range Egg Company is now an established provider of Woodland Eggs, an initiative that many other companies are now following.

JONNY WALTON

Key facts:

- It costs The Lakes Free Range Egg Company £2,000 per hectare to plant, but payback is achieved in six months.
- Data proves that tree planting improves shell quality and can drive up the percentage of Grade A eggs by some two per cent. This is equivalent to an extra 4,800 Grade A eggs from a flock of 10,000 hens laying 24 dozen eggs per bird.
- Health and welfare benefits include reduced stress, lower levels of injurious feather pecking and improved conditions within sheds.
- Hen mortality can also be reduced, particularly if hens die trying to access houses in periods of panic.
- Trees draw surface water into the soil: this improves muddy conditions and prevents run-off of contaminants, such as phosphates, into water courses.
- Chicken sheds produce ammonia and tree planting can help intercept ammonia emissions, which is important for buffering sensitive habitats.
- Planting at The Lakes Free Range Egg Company has had an immediate effect on wildlife and biodiversity, with barn owls and red squirrels now re-established on the farm.

Natural behaviours drive better returns

David Brass' support for tree planting not only comes from its commercial benefits, but also from a deep appreciation of animal behaviour. Chickens are woodland animals and will often avoid open fields and gather under trees for security. While free range requirements were originally met by paddocks, David quickly saw the benefit of trees in encouraging his hens to leave the barns. Drawing them outside improved the conditions inside; reducing fouling and helping fight disease.

Stress is a major issue in large commercial flocks and contributes to poor bird condition, injurious feather pecking and low quality egg production. In 1995, a scientific study by C. J. Savory demonstrated a clear link between tree cover, range use and reduced injurious feather pecking. What's more, tree planting was also proven to reduce mortality by addressing some key issues. For example, it is universally recognised that if frightened, chickens will bolt for a more secure environment. In open fields, if they feel threatened in any way they will often bolt for the barn. Unfortunately, they can suffocate one another in the doorways amidst the panic.

Tree planting reduces this risk. In wooded ranges, chickens are able to hide amongst the trees and avoid a crush. By planting trees, David has found that an improvement in behaviour delivers significant welfare returns and, crucially, increases production.

Regulations driving change

While some farmers remain sceptical about the benefits of tree planting, many are having their first experience as a result of the new Freedom Food regulations which came into force in October 2014. The new regulations require five per cent of laying hen ranges to be planted, causing farmers to undertake planting schemes for the first time.

Speaking of this, David concludes, "As more people are driven to plant, more see the benefits: economically, in terms of welfare, and a better environment in the houses. Once farmers start tree planting they go on to plant more, including hedgerows and single field trees. It has become a good investment. They have found, as we did, that there is no downside to planting trees. There just isn't."

For more information, planting advice and support from the Woodland Trust, contact:
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Tips on planting for poultry

- The Lakes Free Range Egg Company plants trees at two metre spacing in rows four metres apart.
- Good planting helps grass to thrive right up to the sheds. Planting often starts near the sheds to encourage chickens to venture out, and then spreads.
- Planting includes fast growing species (poplar and willow) and authentic local varieties (birch, oak, wild cherry, holly and sycamore).
- Bushy plants are avoided, as the objective is to get good grass cover underneath. Long grass and low bushes encourage chickens to lay eggs outside the barns.
- Young trees are thinned and low quality wood pulped for the farm's biomass boiler. This is in line with the Government's RHI (Renewable Heat Incentive) payment scheme.
- Maintenance is simple and low cost, but does need specialist knowledge. The Lakes Free Range Egg Company runs training courses for supplier farmers.
- Previously, Forestry Commission schemes required trees to be planted too densely for grass to grow and chickens to forage. Now the Forestry Commission accepts lower density planting.
- Some farmers are incorporating fruit trees into their planting as an additional cash crop.
- As the trees mature, sheep and cattle can be introduced into the planted areas.

JONNY WALTON

David's hens roaming under the farm's tree cover.

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