ESTABLISHING AND MAINTAINING THE RANGE

Sandra Pegler *Freerange Meat Chicken Grower*

PLANNING

The first and most important thing to do when establishing a free range facility is to obtain a set of standards required by your Processor and the accompanying Audit/Accreditation group. These Standards will set out the required area of range relative to the size of your shed, the number and size of hatch/pop doors, area of shade and trees and type of fencing. At this point it is useful to draw a plan showing the placement of all these things and clearly indicate measurements. This plan will be required by the Processor and the Auditor in future audits. Think carefully about the practical elements of these plans and how they will impact the day to day running of your farm, e.g. where gates are placed, do they allow vehicle access? How do I open hatches, are they winched or otherwise? When hatches are closed, what set up will give me the best seal on my type of sheds? A good tip is to retain a lip on the bottom edge of the hatch to prevent litter escaping onto the range.

GROUNDWORK

The amount of work required to establish a range and appropriate pasture will depend on your site. Is the site level enough or will it need earthworks? If level, is the vegetation on it appropriate to graze or will it need work. If it is a greenfield site and needs earthwork but it does have a good cover of suitable grass, that grass can be pushed off to the perimeters by machine, heaped to retain moisture and act as buffers to prevent runoff, and satisfy any Local Authority concerns, while the area is filled or worked. It is then a good idea to level this area with a spreader bar to ensure easy mowing. The retained grass mounds can then be spread back over the area and growth encouraged by a light application of poultry litter and water. Areas that are level enough but need some pasture assistance may benefit from a “tickle up” with a suitable implement,eg.a scarafyer, and oversowing with a suitable seed mix. Most produce stores have a reasonably priced, made up seed mix suitable to the area they’re in and will provide the advice you need for what you are trying to achieve

PASTURE.

There doesn’t seem to be any really hard and fast rules about what free range pastures should be or not be other than to say:

1. The land where birds are permitted to range must have shade, shelter and palatable vegetation.
2. The range area must be capable of continued production of vegetation.

If you Google “What do chickens eat in the wild?” and it will tell you, grains, seeds, greens, mice, worms, whatever is available in small quantities, including the occasional dead snake! It will also tell you chickens cannot exist on vegetation alone and will require up to 70% grain.

Processing companies will have their own set of stipulations eg.there is to be no water lying on the range so as to not attract water birds. So in other words, the range is predominately a welfare/quality of life issue. In actual fact a “poultry preferred” range might have a variety of vegetation, hills and dales and some bare earth sections to scratch, dig worms and dust bathe. What is not required is a highly manicured lawn.

Meat chickens around Australia are grown in such a diversity of climates and soil types, I will not try to cover all the possibilities. You will see from the slides on display a selection of the different types of vegetation utilized, depending on what difficulties you encounter in your particular area. Very dry areas will need to set up simple irrigation systems.

In my own area, on the coast east of Brisbane, we have a mild, semi-tropical climate with plenty of moisture and high humidity. This area is ideally suited to growing Kikuyu, and in fact in the summer, it is hard to keep short enough, so our range maintenance program is pretty basic. Another tip when first establishing the range, if you have extensive bare patches, e.g. where roads were formally, these areas can be lightly disturbed and round bales rolled out over them. After the first batch, when the chickens have had their way with the hay, the remainder will seed to some extent during the break and will also act as a seed bed for the mix you got from the produce store. This repair method could be used at any time if bare patches become a problem. If I remember correctly, we used two round bales rolled out over an area of 120m x 2m.

DIFFICULT AREAS

For land that is degraded, scalded or no longer growing vegetation, or has an autumn feed gap, SALTBUSH may be your answer. I have no experience of it myself, but I believe the best variety is Australian Oldman Saltbush (*Atriplex nummularia*).

Pros/Cons:

- Rich in protein, minerals, salt.
- Tough once established.
- Well adapted to arid, dry atmosphere.
- No pests or diseases.
- Suitable to short bursts of grazing with spells - should suit the cyclical nature of poultry batches.
- NO evidence of weight gain - will hold condition.
- Difficult to establish and expensive - $800 ha.
- Should not be grazed before 18 months - short bursts of poultry may be different.
- Consists of male and female plants therefore needs cross pollination. Needs to be grown from runners.

KIKUYU

- In the right climatic conditions, can be established relatively easily.
- Slower growing in winter.
- Prolific and fast growing in summer.
- Somewhat frost tolerant and grazing hardy.
- Seed can be expensive, can be grown from runners.

RHODES

- Some varieties of Rhodes Grass (Topcut or Finecut) may be useful in a wide variety of soils and climates.
- Rhodes can be planted into a fully prepared seed bed or oversown in a lightly disturbed pasture.
- Best not to harrow after planting as small seed may be buried.
- Oversowing with Rye in winter maybe helpful in some areas.

RYE and MILLET

Rye and millet are useful in many areas to broadcast on bare or overused areas between batches.

In some problem areas different things have been used, such as light plantings of oats, allowing it to form clumps. It seems anything like this is acceptable as long as it gives poultry something green to pick at, play with and shelter in.

SHADE

Once again types of shade structures are many and varied, you will see some variations in the slides. In my own case, under company instructions, we were told to install large, expensive shades on expensive posts. Our area is prone to severe storms in summer and as a result these shade sails have been ripped and torn down at least three times in the last four years, and the insurance company refuses to insure them. One repair bill was $12000.

What is the best type of shade structure and which ones will the chickens utilize the most? It seems likely birds will go to lower structures and if they can be moved will this help eradication of bare patches in pasture.

If you go online and look at free ranges in USA, you will see pictures of old farm hay trailers and car bodies being used for shade?! Maybe not desirable but apparently they do the trick.

FENCES

Processors provide standards for fencing but once again, anything reasonable and secure is appropriate, as long as it keeps out predators. A couple of suggestions:

1. An electric wire close to the bottom of the fence may help deter predators from digging in.
2. Sometimes hawks can be a problem and can be deterred by hanging moving scarecrows as high as possible in a manner which allows them to move around in the wind.

SHADE TREES & SHRUBS

Look once again at your climate and check out what trees and shrubs are doing well in your area. It is my opinion that it is a good idea to choose trees which do not grow excessively tall, as they will shade too big an area and prevent vegetation growth under them. Stay away from gums as they are not such a great shade tree and they drop large dangerous limbs. Choose trees with a good canopy and it is a good idea to trim trees and shrubs up underneath to promote spread and allow mower access.

All in all, setting up and maintaining ranges is about using common sense and paying keen attention to what your particular circumstance requires. If you don't know, get advice from those who know about grasses, pasture etc. Remember to keep your climate in mind and above all, do whatever will best suit your farming practices. If you do not have a lot of staff, and time is precious, keep it simple.