

Chicken Connection

By
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SOUTH OF DANUBE, MINN., JUST MILES FROM THE Golden Oval Eggs complex near Renville, Minn., a rural Minnesota woman runs a thriving ag business.

Barb Frank is the owner of The Pullet Connection, a farm that contracts with Golden Oval to raise replacement hens for the egg laying cooperative.

“Nobody believed a woman can run a farm by herself, especially one of this caliber,” said Frank. “I was in for a testing I couldn’t believe, but Golden Oval believed in me.”

Golden Oval, the 10th largest egg company in the nation, owns the birds and feed while Frank owns the facilities and contracts to raise the birds.

Frank and her former husband put up the first barn in 1980. She expanded the business in 1994 when two more barns were added and again in 2003 when the newest barn was constructed.

In addition to the barns, Frank’s operation consists of miles and miles of augers which deliver food to the chickens, more than 300 motors and 200 gear boxes.

Once a month, she receives truckloads of day-old birds from a hatchery in Spencer, Iowa. The tiny birds arrive in plastic campers and have to be hand fed a specialty feed for the first few days. The birds will also be vaccinated twice within the first 24 hours of arriving.

“If you’re comfortable, it’s not right,” said Frank, noting that while the ideal conditions of 90 degree barns with 70 percent humidity are great for chickens, it can be miserable for their human tenders.

After 15 to 18 weeks at The Pullet Connection, the chickens move on to the next step.

“The schedule is coordinated a year in advance,” said Frank.

The birds depart by the thousands – it will take 10 to 13 semis to ship out the 100,000 to 132,000 birds to the Renville laying plant.

For Frank, one of the great parts of the business is that it is family-run.

“I love working with my kids. I like the flexibility of the farm,” said Frank, who has been in the poultry business for 32 years.

“I was shocked when Becky said she wanted to come back,” said Frank.

Her daughter, Becky, and son-in-law, Shaun Bruns, joined the operation after attending school in Willmar where Becky studied in the veterinary technology program and her husband studied auto mechanics.

“When she came home, I decided to turn over the husbandry management to her. She’s responsible for the birds and he’s got the machinery,”





Above: Barb Frank, seated at the computer, and her daughter, Becky Bruns, review environmental conditions within The Pullet Connection's four barns. **Opposite:** Barb Frank displays a few chicks that will reside at her Danube, Minn., farm for up to 18 weeks.

said Frank. Frank is responsible for the financial management and contract negotiations.

The Pullet Connection has four full time employees and three to four part-time employees, depending on what stage the pullets are at. When it comes time to do major bird moves, whether that is between barns or when they're shipped to Golden Oval, the farm will have 12 to 14 people around.

"There aren't many women around running a farm, but it's nice that my

daughter is running it with me," Frank said.

Frank is also involved in local community groups but is only involved with those she feels she can leave better than what it was.

That philosophy is also one evident in her business.

"You need to be the best you can be – you have to be better at it than they can be," said Frank, whose business is one of the largest private pullet growing operations in the country.

SDSU research: Successful Rural Women Entrepreneurs

Women entrepreneurs in rural South Dakota define success in terms of their role in their communities, not simply in terms of profit.

South Dakota State University economics professor Carol Cumber says that's one of the surprising findings in a study that is one of the first to look at rural women entrepreneurs in South Dakota. Cumber carried out the study with the help of graduate student researcher Abigail Meeder.

"Traditionally, when success in running a business is defined, there tends to be an automatic assumption of financial success – how much profit have you made," Cumber said.

The SDSU survey of rural businesswomen challenged that assumption.

"We found that the most popular response was that they defined themselves as being successful if they were helping others," Cumber said. "That was followed by contributing to family income and making a profit was third."

Cumber notes that of 110 rural women entrepreneurs who completed the survey, almost all of them defined their businesses as being successful even though one business owner reported making only about \$1,000 in annual gross sales. Cumber said that women are at least half owners in 54.5 percent of all privately held firms in South Dakota.

"The one thing we really found borne out is that rural business owners can benefit from the strong social ties of the small community," Cumber said. "People know each other, not just as the business owner, but perhaps they go to the same church, or their children are at the same school. So there's that support network which turned out to be a very positive aspect for rural women business owners."

When asked to describe what they believed were very high needs of rural women business owners, Meeder said that entrepreneurs ranked a willingness to take a risk as most important. That was followed by personal support systems, qualified workers, sources of financing, training programs and mentors.

2007 Rural Women's Conference

The South Dakota Women in Ag group is holding the 2007 Rural Women's Conference Sept. 14-15, 2007, at the Spearfish Holiday Inn and Convention Center in Spearfish, S.D.

The group says that in South Dakota's agriculture-based society, every woman is a woman in agriculture, whether on the farm or ranch, providing loans for producers or something in between.

The conference is designed to acknowledge what women already do and contribute to their knowledge base on topics relevant to every day life,

as well as create new ties.

The conference goals include:

- Empower women by providing educational opportunities using current non-biased research based information.

- Strengthen families through improved family communication, stress prevention, coping techniques and financial management skills.

- Build bridges between communities, government leaders, commodity groups and

agriculture.

For more information on the conference, contact Sandy Huber by mail at PO Box M, Martin, SD 57551, by phone at 605-685-6972 or fax at 605-685-6311 or by e-mail at huber.sandy@ces.sdstate.edu

