



Roger and Sue Moore, Rotoiti Farms, 110 acres of organic forestry and egg production, Taumarunui.

## THE CHICKENS AND THEIR EGGS - ROTOITI FARMS

The first thing you notice when visiting Roger and Sue Moore is their farm's isolation, about 32 kilometres west of Taumarunui along the 'Hidden Highway'. The Moores' property is a secluded valley of 110 acres, all certified organic. On one side of the valley there is grazing, and an area planted in pine trees. On the other - steeper - side are four hen houses and free range areas, linked by a track to the house and packing shed.

Roger and Sue purchased their property seven years ago and have been certified organic for about 6 years. Their certifier took into account previous land management practices, and the former owner had kept good records, says Roger. They realised early on that just sheep and cattle wouldn't provide sufficient income, so they decided to farm free range organic chickens.

Roger explains that an advantage of farming organic free range chickens for egg supply was that the almost immediate monthly income helped with cash flow.

Their free range operation of about 2,500 birds is mid-range in New Zealand, producing approximately 16% of all the country's organic egg supply.

Sue proudly points out their operation is almost self-sufficient for farm inputs - they even bag the chicken compost to sell as Rotoiti Hennies Pennies. They have also found that their paddocks green up faster than their conventional neighbours after a stress period, such as last year's drought.

"We have put what would otherwise be basically unproductive land to good use by farming the chickens" explains Roger.

No artificial pesticides, herbicides, fungicides or insecticides are used on the farm. The main pests are rodents and feral cats, and these are caught using mechanical traps.

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Roger Moore with one of his free range organic chickens.

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The hens are kept in small flocks at and range freely on the hillside paddocks, with plenty of scrub providing natural shelter. The chickens are kept at about 6 birds per square metre inside the laying houses, compared to intensive operations of 10 birds per square metre, and they can always venture outside. Only organically certified feed - with no genetically modified grain - is used. Special attention is paid to ensuring hens can move freely during daylight hours and stretch their wings, that they have sun and dust baths, and can scratch for worms and insects. The hens have sufficient perch space in the hen houses and have dry, clean litter to keep themselves clean.

The Moores take pride in the fact that their eggs are produced by free range organic hens, and have been collected, inspected and packed by hand. Eggs are packed in half dozen cardboard eggs cartons and kept at 15° C.

The Moores sell most of their eggs through a distributor. "It is not easy to produce eggs and market them yourself. We have found that, with about 2,000 eggs per day, it is best to use a marketer and distributor" states Roger. Both a solid market and continuity of supply are required, with eggs mainly distributed to Auckland, Tauranga and Hamilton.

The supply of organic chicken feed provides a major challenge, with organic grain about double the price of conventionally grown grain.

The Moores are receiving good feedback from their market. Roger says the colour of their yolks is a 'dramatic' yellow, with a more solid egg shell ensuring less damage during transport.

Roger has been frequently asked about how to build laying sheds and ensure organic chickens remain healthy. This interest prompted Roger to begin a consultancy service

When asked what makes their organic farm successful, Roger answers; "lifestyle, income and satisfaction spring to mind but not necessarily in that order". They looked for something to increase their income and which fitted their lifestyle, while giving them satisfaction. Their success also has a lot to do with ingenuity and hard work.

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Roger and Sue in their egg pack-house

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