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Sisters raise chicks, and will help others to do so

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WEARE – Some years back, an incubator full of eggs sat on the kitchen floor of Sarah and Jane Koski’s house.

The eggs had been warming there for several weeks, with the girls diligently turning them three times a day.

Finally, the eggs began to tremble. Then, they started cracking: tiny beaks poking through the shells, then feet, a wing or two and at last, the squirmy little chicks.

The whole event got the girls so jazzed that they grabbed their sleeping bags and camped in the kitchen for the night.

“It was just the excitement of the new chicks,” said Sarah Koski, now 17. “We didn’t want to leave them.”

That first hatch solidified an already strong agricultural spirit in the Koski sisters, who since then have been raising their own chicks and selling their table eggs.

Now, the Koskis are expanding their Weare-based operation by selling fertilized eggs and helping people start raising their own free-range birds.

Richard Uncles of the state’s Department of Agriculture said there’s “no doubt” of a rising attraction to locally grown foods.

“People want to do this because they can be assured that what they’re producing is produced in a way that is healthy and safe,” Uncles said. “There’s no fresher product than a day-old egg.”

The Koskis certainly know that.

Sarah and Jane are home-schooled and live with their parents, Michael and Patricia Koski, and younger sister, Emma, at Maatila Farm. Michael Koski works for the University of New Hampshire Cooperative Extension and got the sisters involved in 4-H long ago.

These days, Sarah and Jane take care of 20 Production Reds – the clucking crew of auburn hens that hang out in a covered coop near the Koski house.

“Hello, ladies!” Sarah Koski exclaimed, walking into the coop last week. (The sisters like talking to the chickens. They say it makes for cheery birds.)

But the best ingredient for satisfied chickens is space, they said.

The hens are free-range, meaning they aren’t confined to a cage. While the hens tend to stay close to the coop during the winter, they have access to the Koskis’ entire 5-acre property in the summer. That’s when they scratch the dirt and grass, rooting around for bugs.

“That’s what makes them happiest,” Sarah Koski said. “You can tell.”

For years, the Koskis raised the hens without a rooster to fertilize the eggs. But last spring, after discovering a lack of fertilized egg vendors in New Hampshire, the sisters decided to try it on a small scale.

They added a rooster to their flock, began collecting fertilized eggs and sold a few dozen to members of their 4-H club and friends.

But the idea kept growing when the sisters learned about 4-H’s partnership with Youth Venture, a national organization that provides



Staff photo by Bob Hammerstrom
Sarah, right, and Jane Koski of Weare,
stand in the doorway to their chicken
coop Monday, February 1, 2010.

seed money and guidance to young people for community projects. Youth Venture and 4-H were offering up to \$1,000 for teams with agricultural plans that have lasting public benefit.

The Koski sisters then began developing a business plan for their project, called “Two Spring Chicks.”

Here’s how it works: the girls will provide all the materials needed for folks in Greater Nashua to hatch chicks and raise them. People can rent an incubator for \$15 and buy a dozen fertile eggs for \$10. The girls will also provide educational materials and information, and if the service is for a classroom, they will provide workshops for students.

An important piece of the plan also calls for the girls taking back chicks that people don’t want. This is especially common for teachers, who want to their students to learn about the hatching experience but have no space for the chicks afterward.

The classrooms that hatch the chicks can give them back to the Koskis, who will add them to their flock or sell them to other 4-H folks.

In recent weeks, the sisters presented the plan to a selection panel of community leaders, who approved the idea and granted them \$800 to get going. The Koskis will be among just a few local operations offering fertilized eggs.

Most people who want chicks go one of two routes, Uncles said. They either buy chicks through mail order or get them at their local grain store.

He liked the sisters’ plan.

“We’re supportive of what they’re doing,” Uncles said. “We think it’s great.”

In general, Uncles said, New Hampshire’s hatchery industry is “all but gone.” It flourished up until the 1950s, but then giant poultry facilities in other states began producing eggs in huge numbers and selling them cheaply. That put family farms in New Hampshire out of business.

Now, most table eggs in New England are produced at two or three farms, Uncles said. Although the state doesn’t keep records on the number of backyard chicken coops, Uncles said the state fields frequent calls about how to get them started.

But perhaps the best evidence of people wanting locally grown products is in farmers markets, which have grown from 10 to 70 in the state in the last decade, Uncles said.

“They started with more with fruits and vegetables, but we’re now seeing it cross over to livestock products,” Uncles said.

The Koskis have sold their goods at the Weare Farmers’ Market, and they hope for more success with Two Spring Chicks.

“I want to make a profit,” said Jane Koski, 12.

“It will be nice to see it become financially sustainable,” Sarah Koski said. “For me, it’s also exciting to see it spread. I never get tired of showing children a hatching for the first time.”