

Site manager **BETH BENNETT**
with Hy-Line's **KRAIG SHEPHARD**



ORGANIC RECRUITMENT DRIVE CONTINUES

With demand for organic eggs showing no signs of slowing down, it's no surprise that packers are looking for extra supplies.

One of those is Anglia Free Range Eggs (AFRE) whose managing director Harry Irwin said: "Over the last two years we have seen increased demand for organic egg and we have instigated a recruitment plan to satisfy this demand. Organic sales have increased in both the chicken & egg sectors and would appear to be driven by a healthy eating motivation."

AFRE was formed in 2012 by a small group of producers who, having previously supplied national packers, wanted to branch out into marketing direct. As one of the founding directors, Harry already had a long-term trading relationship with Tesco, supplying the retailer with free range and organic chicken. AFRE was set up to do the same with eggs and



has grown to be a significant player in the egg marketing sector.

“Our objective is to work with progressive farmers looking for long term commitments to supply retail sales, says Harry. “We offer incentives for new builds and have a feed tracker scheme in place to help smooth out the volatility of the feed market.” In addition to would-be organic producers investing in new facilities, a switch to organic could secure the future for smaller, traditional free range sites which may be struggling to compete with the economies of scale offered by larger units, believes Harry, who himself supplies AFRE with organic eggs.

Willowfields is a purpose-built 6,000 bird unit in Norfolk, operated by Free Range Chicken Ltd. Now on its second flock of Hy-Line Browns, production is impressive, as explained by site manager Beth Bennett. “At Week 62 they are still laying at 92 per cent and mortality is

under three per cent. That figure would have been nearer to one per cent if it hadn't been for some smothering and fox predation.” With an order for Hy-Lines for the next flock already placed with Country Fresh Pullets, Beth's choice of breed centres around the Hy-Line's docility and feather cover. “This is a major consideration when you have hens with intact beaks and when faced with the constraints surrounding organic feed formulations,” says Beth, who did wonder whether last winter's Housing Order would impact on flock behaviour and feather cover but her antidote of providing additional enrichments paid dividends. “Whilst the hens had access to organic lucerne bales, we also provided a generous helping of pecking blocks which proved a big hit and once the hens had got through them, they continued to be entertained by pecking at the upturned plastic bowls.”

When it comes to the flock's productivity and health status, it's probably no coincidence



that the farm operates to very strict biosecurity protocols. Visitors' cars remain outside the site perimeter whilst any vehicles which have to enter are thoroughly disinfected with a high volume of disinfectant delivered from a hose at the turn of a tap. Staff and any visitors entering the poultry house are required to shower before changing into clean clothes. "When it comes to organic standards, red mite and disease treatment options are very limited so it makes sense to keep it out in the first place," says Beth.

Average egg weight for the flock is currently 63.5 grams which is considered ample for the sales profile required, with target egg weights for organic generally lower than for free range. According to Harry the reasons for this are twofold. "Organic birds are under more nutritional stress and are also fully beaked which means we need to minimise production stress and hence target a lower egg size. That means we're looking for a 62

gram average compared to a 64 gram average for free range. Breed selection is also very important in this respect. Secondly, because of the significant costs of organic production, it is critical to utilise as much of the production as possible into the organic market. Selling the egg as mixed weight helps on this front and also takes some of the pressure off egg size."

When it comes to the demand for Large in the free range market, this remains high and is reflected in producer price returns, says Harry. "The percentage Large supplied in the last cycle has returned to our flock target which helps balance supply. The key for us is managing flocks to ensure we maintain a sustainable egg size, for both producers and customers. We are currently also recruiting for free range egg producers to develop the long term growth plan within our key customer base."