

A Better Bedding ?

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BROADWAY - To the untrained eye, Dennis and Pam Miller's poultry house is no different than most others in the area. It's about 25,000 square feet of chicken habitat, with the familiar technology pumping out water and heat to 38,000 chicks.

But the unassuming poultry house on Turley Creek Lane near Broadway is home to an experiment that could ultimately help farmers across the central Valley - or even, across the nation.

The Miller farm is one of the first in the nation, if not the first, to use native warm season grass pellets covered with a mixture of the grasses as poultry **bedding** . The mixture includes Big Bluestem, switchgrass and Indiangrass.

The company supplying the mixture and creating the pellets, Springfield, Ohio-based FDC Enterprises Grasslands Services, has planted more than 225,000 acres of native grass across 21 states. They've purchased a mobile machine that will pelletize the grasses.

For the near future, the machine will be housed at the company's processing facility in Blackstone, according to President Fred Circle.

While farmers nationwide, including some in the Valley, have experimented with using switchgrass as poultry **bedding** , the Millers know of no one else using the three-grass mixture along with the pellets.

Dennis Miller is hoping the move will save him money and help him produce healthier chickens.

"The big thing is, if we can get it established in the Valley, we can grow our own **bedding** ," Miller said.

He used to put down what many local farmers typically use for **bedding** - pine shavings. But the price has increased steadily, from about \$700 a truckload when he bought his farm in 1994 to roughly \$1,700 per truckload now.

Today, it would cost him about \$3,400 to fill each of his three poultry houses, which he does about twice a year. He also pays about \$375 per house for chemicals that help to reduce ammonia emissions.

Ammonia is detrimental to the health of both chickens and workers.

"If we can control ammonia, it would definitely give us a better chance to grow a better chicken at a lower cost," Miller said.

He's hoping the grass mixture combined with the pellets will do just that.

While the grass costs about \$350 per acre to grow, it's perennial, doesn't require fertilizer and doesn't need prime soil to grow, according to Circle. Factoring in the lost revenue due to not growing row crops on the site, the grass costs roughly \$450 an acre to establish, he estimated.

While poultry companies pay for the birds and their feed, the growers are required to cover the cost of **bedding**.

The pellets are designed to absorb moisture, and therefore ammonia, much better than pine shavings and other traditional **bedding** can. That could mean growers could leave the **bedding** in for longer, which would also cut costs.

Switchgrass itself, with a root system that can delve 8 feet deep, is lauded for helping to improve soil and reduce runoff.

Another use that the company has found for the grass mixture is as a biofuel. The company is heating the Piedmont Geriatric Hospital in Burkeville entirely by burning the mixture.

Heating poultry houses with the pellets is a possibility down the road, if the right machinery became available, Circle said.

The Millers, as well as company officials, are monitoring the project to determine whether it is as cost-effective as they hope it will be.

They should have some answers after the Millers deliver their flock of chickens, which were brought to the farm in late February.

Dennis Miller said that if poultry companies see financial benefits from the **bedding** mixture, they will likely embrace a switch to it.

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