

# The History of the Commercial Egg Industry in Lesotho (1941-1994)

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*The history of the commercial poultry industry in Lesotho started from humble beginnings in 1941 through the efforts of the Basutoland Department of Agriculture. This paper attempts to provide the history of the commercial poultry during Lesotho in the period 1941-1994. This period can be divided into four distinct time periods; 1941-1952, 1953-1961, 1962-1972 and 1973-1994. Prior to 1941 poultry farming was practised on a small scale with farmers keeping indigenous breeds. It is thought that during this period there were no improved poultry breeds kept by farmers in the country. The period 1941-1952 saw the introduction of improved breeds by the Department of Agriculture through the Poultry Improvement Scheme. In the period 1953-1962 a poultry plant was built in Maseru which produced improved chickens which were sold to farmers. The period 1963-1972 was marked by the establishment of Applied Nutrition Programme and the establishment of egg marketing co-operatives. The period 1973-1994 was marked by a regulated egg marketing system. At present there are over 3 000 commercial poultry farmers raising around 200 000 layers producing over 3 million dozen eggs per annum. Poultry farming has been said to be a success story in Lesotho and it is argued that this can be attributed to the efforts of the Poultry Production Section of the Ministry of Agriculture and the Department of Cooperatives of the Ministry of Rural Development. It is also argued that the increase in the number of commercial layers can be attributed to the single-channel egg marketing system whereby farmers were guaranteed payment whether the marketing outlets sold or did not sell the eggs. The other reason for the increase in layers was that the Lesotho commercial egg industry was protected from external competition. The increase in commercial egg production has however met with marketing problems which resulted in egg marketing system being deregulated in 1994.*

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## Introduction

Commercial poultry farming has been said to be one of the success stories in Lesotho's agriculture. This is mainly because Lesotho is in most instances

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self-sufficient in egg production. The history of commercial poultry farming in Lesotho dates back to 1941 when the Basutoland Department of Agriculture introduced commercial poultry farming through the Poultry Improvement Scheme. Since that time commercial egg farming in Lesotho progressed rapidly such that by 1987/88 there were 3 635 commercial poultry farmers keeping 229 400 commercial layers in Lesotho. By 1994/95 the number of layers had dropped to 169 217. Poultry farming has been thought to provide an excellent example of meeting Lesotho's national development objectives of increased employment, income growth and distribution, and nutritional improvement. One of the advantages of poultry farming is that it can be operated by female labour. This is crucial as approximately 40 percent of Lesotho's male labour force works in South African mines as migrants. One problem facing Lesotho is overgrazing which has led to land degradation. The problem of overstocking can be solved by destocking. It has been recommended that destocking can be achieved by substituting cattle, sheep and goats with pigs, poultry, rabbits and other confined animals which do not utilise range resources (Eckert *et al*, 1982).

The history of the commercial poultry industry in Lesotho can be divided into four distinct time periods; 1941-1952, 1953-1961, 1962-1972 and 1973-1994. During the period prior to 1941 poultry farming was practised on a small scale with farmers keeping indigenous breeds. It is thought that during this period there were no improved poultry breeds kept by farmers in the country. The period 1941-1952 saw the introduction of improved breeds by the Department of Agriculture through the Poultry Improvement Scheme. In the period 1953-1962 a poultry plant was built in Maseru which produced improved chickens which were sold to farmers. The period 1963-1972 is marked by the establishment of Applied Nutrition Programme and the establishment of egg marketing co-operatives. The period 1973-1994 is marked by a regulated egg marketing system. The post 1994 period is marked by a free market system whereby farmers can sell anywhere at free market prices. This came about when some poultry farmers farmers appealed to the Ministry of Agriculture to be allowed to sell eggs directly to wholesalers, retailers and consumers. This resulted in the deregulation of the egg marketing system.

The purpose of this paper is to provide the history of the commercial egg industry of Lesotho up to 1994 and to examine the structural changes which

have occurred in the industry. In addition the paper attempts to provide reasons for the increased egg production in Lesotho.

### **The 1941-1952 Period**

According to the Basutoland Department of Agriculture Annual Reports (BDAAR) poultry farming was practised on a small scale in Lesotho before 1941. Many Europeans and a few progressive local farmers were enthusiastic about poultry farming but disease, thieves and vermin materially handicapped the progress of the industry (BDAAR, 1936). Most eggs produced in Lesotho were produced by subsistence farmers who stocked free range indigenous fowls which were kept around the homes and gardens. In 1941 the Poultry Improvement Scheme was started by the Department of Agriculture whereby foundation stocks of Australorp, Rhode Island Red, Light Sussex and White Wyandotte breeds were purchased from prominent poultry breeders in the Union of South Africa and Bechuanaland. It was reported that the Black Australorp and Rhode Island Red were more suitable for Lesotho conditions than the Light Sussex. The breeding stock was kept at the Government Poultry Breeding house in Maseru where eggs were incubated. The progeny, irrespective of sex, was initially sold to farmers when six months old at 3/-. In the years from 1946 onwards the improved chickens were sold to farmers when three to four months old. Farmers crossed the improved birds with indigenous fowls. The crossed fowls did very well and produced a bird of medium size with greatly improved egg production (BDAAR, 1947). By 1943 over 300 improved fowls were distributed to farmers (Table 1). In 1948 it was reported that the demand for poultry was good and it was not possible with present equipment to hatch sufficient chickens to meet the demand (BDAAR, 1948).

**Table 1: Number of improved fowls distributed to farmers in Lesotho, 1941-1952**

Year	Number of chickens
1941-1943	300+
1944	250
1945	165
1946	203
1947	190
1948	180
1949-1952	N/A

Source: Basutoland Department of Agriculture Annual Reports (1943-1952).

### **The 1953-1961 Period**

In November 1952 work on the establishment of the Maseru Experimental Station (present day Agricultural Research Division) started. The purpose of the Experimental Station was to conduct research on various agricultural activities. In addition the Experimental Station was to produce lucerne and breed pigs and poultry. There has always been a demand for young poultry and pigs among Basotho and facilities were being provided to satisfy this demand (BDAAR, 1953). In 1953, a 20 000 gallon reservoir was built and piping laid on from the reservoir to provide water for the pig and poultry runs. An electric incubator was also installed. The electric incubator was to produce 200 chickens a week which were to be sold to farmers when three months old.

In 1954 more poultry runs and houses were erected together with a modern type brooder house. Fifty (50) Rhode Island Red fowls were purchased and 500 chickens hatched out in an initial trial of the system. In its first season of operation in 1955 the poultry production and distribution scheme hatched 6 100 Rhode Island Red chickens. It was reported that each week 200 three-month old chickens were transported to one of the nine districts holding pens where they were sold at production cost price to farmers (BDAAR, 1955). In all the districts the demand for stock exceeded the available supply. Table 2 shows

the number of Rhode Island Red chickens sold to farmers in the period 1955-1961.

**Table 2: Number of Rhode Island Red Chickens sold to farmers in Lesotho, 1955-1961**

Year	Number
1955	6 100
1956	3 038
1957	2 078
1958	1 431
1959	3 990
1960	2 822
1961	2 011

Source: Basutoland Department of Agriculture Annual Reports (1954-1962).

It should be noted that Table 2 does not reflect the total number of improved chickens sold to farmers. There were some progressive farmers who were hatching improved chickens and selling them to other farmers. For instance in 1958 an ex-school teacher at Morija was hatching eggs in a home-made incubator which held 200 eggs at a time (BDAAR, 1958). In 1958 the sale of poultry from the Experimental Station was discontinued when a routine check showed the presence of Bacillary White Diarrhoea (B.W.D). All breeding birds and chickens on hand were disposed of and distribution to farmers discontinued. This explains the low numbers of chickens distributed to farmers in 1958 (Table 2). New breeding stock was purchased and in 1959 the distribution of chickens to farmers was normalized.

In 1960, 4 092 chickens were hatched of which 2 822 were sold to farmers (BDAAR, 1960). A further 350 chickens of varying ages were on hand at the end of the year. Total deaths amounted to 920. In addition 23 905 eggs were sold in 1960. In 1961 the Poultry Breeding Plant experienced frequent electric power break-downs during the winter months and this resulted in poor production. The frequent power break-downs resulted in the abandonment of incubation at the plant much earlier than usual. The reduced incubation

resulted in additional eggs being available for sale and 32 424 eggs were sold during the year.

In 1957 it is reported that Coccidiosis was found to be rife at the Experimental Farm where fowls were reared under intensive conditions (BDAAR, 1957). Fowl Typhoid was also reported to be rife in Lesotho and all poultry from the Experimental Farm were vaccinated. Fowl Pox was reported to be common but losses from this disease were not significant. In 1960 it was reported that Fowl Typhoid, Fowl Pox, Coccidiosis and chronic respiratory diseases were rife throughout Lesotho (BDAAR, 1960). This was attributable largely to the poor conditions under which birds were maintained and also to the social habit of taking a fowl along as a gift to a friend. Fowls distributed to farmers for breed improvement had very low survival rates because they were continually exposed to infection.

### **The 1962 - 1972 Period**

The Lesotho poultry industry was given a further boost with the establishment of the Applied Nutrition Programme (ANP)/Food and Nutrition Programme funded by FAO and UNICEF. The objective of the ANP was to provide nutrition education along simple lines to Basotho people (BDAAR, 1963). The ANP emphasis was on egg and vegetable production at home and schools. Thus the programme emphasised the urgent need of protein in the human diet. Under the programme farmers were provided with layers and equipment by the programme. The programme aimed at fostering small units (30-100 birds) for egg production in villages. Farmers were encouraged to sell the eggs within their communities and to supply schools and hospitals with eggs at reduced prices as payment in kind for the equipment provided by the programme.

Over 6 000 chickens were distributed to farmers under the ANP in 1962 (Table 3). The number of layers distributed in Maseru district was not reported but it can safely be assumed that more layers were distributed in this district than others because the concentration of poultry farmers was in Maseru district. It is reported that in Mohale's Hoek district several hundred layers were distributed to farmers while no layers were distributed in Qacha's Nek because of the distance from Maseru (BDAAR, 1963).

**Table 3: Number of improved layers distributed to farmers in Lesotho under the Applied Nutrition Programme, 1962**

District	Number of layers
Butha Buthe	2 400
Leribe	349
Berea	477
Maseru	N/A
Mafeteng	1 050
Mohale's Hoek	N/A
Quthing	314
Qacha's Nek	0
Mokhotlong	110

Source: Basutoland Department of Agriculture Annual Report, 1963.

In 1963 the Department of Agriculture had three training farms in Maseru, Hlotse and Mohale's Hoek where farmers were shown how to raise poultry. In the training farms poultry was kept in battery cages (intensive) and a run with shelter (semi-intensive). The number of layers kept under battery system in Maseru was 32, Hlotse 24 and Mohale' Hoek 32 (BDAAR, 1963). It is not mentioned how many layers were kept under the semi-intensive system. In 1962, seven Extension Assistants who were thought to be potential Assistant Field Advisors in poultry were sponsored by the FAO to study poultry management in Natal. In 1966 a full-time Agricultural Officer (Poultry) was appointed. The Agricultural Officer (Poultry) was assisted by one Poultry Supervisor (South) and seven extension agents who were specially trained in poultry farming. With regards to poultry farming the trend was now towards intensive and relatively sophisticated methods of poultry keeping with the battery system ranking first and the deep-litter system second (BDAAR, 1966).

In January 1967, the Mejametalana Poultry Association held its first conference. It is not known when this association was established but it can be assumed that it was established sometime in 1966. This is because the Societies Act was passed in 1966 and it was only under this Act societies/associations could be formed. In August 1967 the Lesotho Poultry

Association (LPA) was formed at the first national poultry farmers conference held in Maseru. The LPA had seven districts and 44 village branches as members and a total membership of 550 poultry farmers. The main activities of the LPA were to arrange for the marketing of eggs and poultry feed distribution. In 1969 the LPA built the first Egg Circles in Mohale's Hoek and Maseru.

One other important facet in the Lesotho poultry industry was the introduction of a regulated marketing system. This came about with enactment of the Agricultural Marketing Act in 1967. The purpose of the Act was to regulate the agricultural marketing system in the country. In 1969 the Agricultural Marketing (Egg Control) Regulations were passed. The purposes of the Regulations were to control the spread of poultry disease and protect the LPA from unfair competition. It was alleged that Republic of South Africa (RSA) poultry farmers were dumping eggs in Lesotho and the small scale Basotho poultry farmers could not compete with them. The Egg Control Regulations controlled the import and export of eggs into Lesotho. Anyone who needed to import or export eggs had to have a permit issued by a Marketing Officer of the Ministry of Agriculture. The import restrictions were implemented to stop the spread of Newcastle diseases and to relieve the chronic egg surpluses in Lesotho which were "due almost completely to the dumping tactics of farmers in the Republic (Marketing Unit Document, 1969 as cited in Ministry of Agriculture, 1980).

A poultry plant was established under the Ministry of Agriculture in 1970. The purpose of the Lesotho Poultry Plant was to hatch pullets for distribution to farmers. This poultry plant has continued to produce limited quantities of layers.

The number of layers and poultry farmers increased during this period. Table 4 shows the number of layers and poultry farmers in Lesotho from 1965 to 1972. As can be seen from Table 4, there were dramatic increases in the number of layers in 1966 and 1969. The decrease in the number of layers in 1970 can be attributed to the egg glut which occurred in 1969. Farmers had to reduce the number of layers because they were making losses as a result of the glut. There was also an increase in the average number of layers kept by each farmer. There was now a tendency for farmers to keep larger number of layers. The average number of layers per farmer increased from 28 in 1965



to 78 in 1970. It should be noted that farmers located in and around urban areas tended to have larger flocks than farmers located in rural areas.

**Table 4: Number of layers and poultry farmers in Lesotho, 1965-1972**

Year	Number of layers	Number of farmers
1965	4 883	173
1966	11 385	300
1967	24 634	558
1968	25 914	N/A
1969	57 521	788
1970	55 000	700
1971	N/A	
1972	65 000	1 200

Source: Basutoland Department of Agriculture Annual Reports and Ministry of Agriculture Annual Reports.

Under the ANP most of the eggs were sold to schools. Table 5 shows the quantity of eggs sold to schools under the ANP. By 1969 most poultry farmers under the ANP had already finished paying for their poultry equipment hence the declining quantities of eggs sold to schools.

**Table 5: Quantity of eggs sold to schools under the ANP, 1965-1969**

Year	Quantity of eggs (dozen)
1965	374
1966	8 518
1967	7 454
1968	8 291
1969	6 473

Source: Ministry of Agriculture Annual Report, 1969.

In 1971 the LPA was registered as a co-operative society and the name changed to Lesotho Poultry Co-operative Society (LPCS). The LPA changed from being an association to a co-operative because members wanted the association to be a co-operative. In addition associations were not catered for by the bye-laws of co-operatives. Furthermore members wanted the association to be audited in order to have the Egg Circles managed effectively and efficiently. It was also only under the Department of Co-operatives where the association could get government auditors. In 1971 the Maseru Egg Circle experienced serious financial and managerial difficulties and the Department of Co-operatives volunteered to assist. The Department of Co-operatives analysed the records of the Egg Circle and put forward proposals designed to eliminate the difficulties (Ministry of Agriculture, 1971). The Department of Co-operatives seconded one of its senior staff members to be the manager of the Egg Circle. Within two months the Egg Circle was operating efficiently.

The registration of the LPA as a co-operative meant that the LPCS was directly under the Department of Co-operatives of the Ministry of Rural Development. Thus, the Poultry Production Section of the Ministry of Agriculture became responsible for advising farmers with the production of eggs while the Department of Co-operatives was responsible for the management and running of the Egg Circles. In practice the Ministry of Agriculture through the Poultry Production Section managed the Egg Circles. By law, the Department of Co-operatives should take full responsibility for the running of Egg Circles, however, in reality it is the Livestock Section (Poultry) which essentially controls Egg Circle management (Ministry of Agriculture, 1980).

### **The 1973-1994 Period**

The period 1973-1994 was marked by a regulated egg marketing system. The Agricultural Marketing (Egg Trading) Regulations 1973 established a single-channel egg marketing system in the country. These regulations empowered the LPCS to be the sole buyer and seller of eggs in Lesotho. This means the LPCS had monopsony and monopoly powers. The LPCS exercised its monopsony and monopoly powers through Egg Circles. The Agricultural Marketing (Price Control of Eggs) Regulations 1974 empowered the Ministry of Agriculture to fix egg prices. Since 1974 the Ministry of Agriculture has been fixing producer, wholesale and retail egg prices. Each year the Poultry of Section, Marketing Division, Department of Co-operatives and LPCS set

maximum egg prices at farm, wholesale and retail levels for Maseru district only. Egg prices in other districts are not gazetted. In 1975, the 1973 Egg Trading Regulations were amended to allow for farm-gate sales. Farmers were allowed to sell two dozen eggs to any person per week.

The major problem which faced the commercial egg industry in Lesotho has been egg over supplies (gluts). Egg gluts are problematic because farmers are required by law to sell eggs to Egg Circles and are guaranteed payment whether the Egg Circles sell eggs or not. In most cases egg gluts result in heavy financial losses to the Egg Circles. Egg gluts usually occur from August to December each year. Chickens naturally produce more eggs during the period August to December because the days get longer and warmer. In contrast to this are egg shortages throughout the country from February to June each year (Malloch and Blake, 1987a). Chickens produce less eggs from February to June because the days get shorter and temperatures drop. Egg shortages are not much of a problem because the shortages are made up by imports from South Africa.

The first egg glut in Lesotho occurred in 1969, however, during the period 1973-1994 egg gluts started to occur on several occasions. In 1978 and 1979 egg gluts occurred in the districts of Maseru and Leribe. The Ministry of Agriculture undertook a study to ascertain if the egg over-supplies were caused by increased production or poor marketing (Ministry of Agriculture, 1980). Some of the findings of the study were that: (i) the sudden expansion of production under inadequate planning conditions resulted in the gluts of 1978 and 1979; (ii) increased egg production was coming primarily from five large producers; (iii) ECs pricing schedules did not reflect market conditions; and (iv) Lesotho's single-channel marketing system worked efficiently with relatively small quantities of eggs but during periods of high production the system breaks down. The study recommended that an integrated and comprehensive plan be implemented to ensure that egg production and distribution systems met Lesotho's needs, production stabilised to meet demand, and guaranteed producer prices be abolished. Between August 1985 and January 1986 a serious egg glut occurred in Maseru district. The Maseru EC had to transfer huge quantities of eggs to its depots and other districts' ECs but the other ECs could not dispose of the eggs such that by end of March, 1986, 700 cases<sup>1</sup> of eggs had got spoiled (Lesotho Agricultural Development Bank, 1986).

The Poultry Plant experienced problems during this period. The hatchery became obsolete and the only operational component of the plant was the pullet rearing unit. The pullet rearing unit imported day-old pullets, raised them to point-of-lay and then distributed them to farmers. The pullet rearing unit had a capacity of 67 600 pullets per annum. In 1987/88 the Poultry Plant was expanded by two 6 000 pullets rearing houses.

The number of layers and poultry continued to increase during this period (Table 6). The number of layers increased from 121 122 in 1979 to 169 217 in 1994/95. The number of layers peaked at 229 400 in 1986/87. Egg production increased from 1 695 708 dozens in 1979 to 3 384 340 dozens in 1994/95. The number of poultry farmers in Lesotho was 1 300 in 1973 (Ministry of Information and Broadcasting, 1974) and this had dropped to 1 197 in 1979 (Ministry of Agriculture, 1980). In 1985 there were 2 333 poultry farmers in Lesotho (Ministry of Agriculture, 1986). By 1987/88 the number of poultry farmers in Lesotho was 3 654.

**Table 6: Number of layers, quantity of eggs produced and sold in Lesotho, 1973-1994**

Year	Number of layers	Quantity of egg produced (doz)	Quantity of eggs sold at farm-gate (doz)	Quantity of eggs sold through egg circles (doz)
1973	80 000			240 000
1974-1978	N/A			
1979	121 122	1 695 708	1 022 913	672 795
1980-1984	N/A			
1985/86	149 986	2 600 000	1 480 748	1 119 252
1986/87	184 000	3 680 000		
1987/88	229 400	4 588 000	3 248 937	1 339 063
1988/89	224 582	4 491 640	3 110 822	1 380 818
1989/90	222 125	4 502 500	3 159 632	1 342 868
1990/91	219 442	4 388 840	3 068 526	1 342 868
1991/92	193 364	3 867 280		
1992/93	186 731	3 734 620		
1993/94	216 330	4 326 600		
1994/95	169 217	3 384 340		

Source: Basutoland Department of Agriculture Annual Reports, Ministry of Agriculture Annual Reports and Bayley and Phororo (1992), Animal Production Division Annual Reports.

### Conclusion

The commercial poultry industry in Lesotho started on a small scale through the efforts of the Basutoland Department in 1941 to the present time whereby there are over 3 000 commercial poultry farmers raising around 200 000 layers producing over 3 million dozen eggs per annum. Commercial poultry farming in Lesotho has made great strides in egg production. Poultry farming has been said to be a success story in Lesotho and it is argued that this can be attributed to the efforts of the Poultry Production Section of the Ministry of Agriculture and the Department of Cooperatives of the Ministry of Rural

Development. It is also argued that the increase in the number of commercial layers can be attributed to the single-channel egg marketing system whereby farmers were guaranteed payment whether the marketing outlets sold or did not sell the eggs. The other reason for the increase in layers was that the Lesotho commercial egg industry was protected from external competition. The increased commercial egg production has however met with marketing problems which resulted in egg marketing system being deregulated in 1994.

**Endnotes**

1. A case holds 30 dozen eggs.

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