

Chicken CHAMPIONS



Carcasses move through a pathogen-preventing bath while still warm to ensure penetration through open pores.

Photos by Matthew A. Wong

Fieldale Farms operations reflect the signs of the times

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Fieldale Farms began in 1972 when the three original owners, Lee and Tom Arrendale and Joe Hatfield Sr. bought the plants from Purina. The name Fieldale is derived from the last half of each of the founder names, Hatfield and Arrendale. The company is still family owned and all of its locations are within a 30-mile radius in the Northeast corner of Georgia.

"Fieldale has two slaughter facilities and one further processing cook plant. This one is slaughter," says David Rackley, plant manager of Fieldale's Murrayville, Georgia, plant, which it acquired in the early 1980s. "The other slaughter plant is in Cornelia, Georgia, which is about 25 or 30 miles from here and the cook plant is in Gainesville, Georgia." Fieldale's corporate office is in Baldwin, Georgia, the first town directly south of Cornelia.

LAY OF THE LAND

Fieldale Farms processes 3 million birds per week with the Murrayville plant responsible for 1.8 million of those. The bulk of the Murrayville plant's two-bird program, consisting of 4.5-lb. live weight for whole bird processing and about 6.8-lb. birds for deboning for foodservice.

"Plus, we're a feeder plant or supply plant for our further processing," Rackley says. "We send a lot of our boneless and tenders to our further processing plant for them to cook." The Cornelia plant handles the retail side of production, which consists mostly of tray pack, Rackley adds.

Fieldale's Murrayville plant employs approximately 1,775 workers for two production shifts and one sanitation shift. For the most part, sanitation is handled in-house, but currently, a third-party company has been contracted to help. "Because of labor, we've had to go out and get a contract crew to come in and just do one section of the plant," Rackley says. "This is just temporary until we can get a more dependable workforce," he says. "We prefer to do it ourselves."

The 210,000-sq.-ft., SQF Level 3 certified

plant produces mostly deboned breast meat and dark meat with some whole birds, as well. "As far as our volume here at the plant over the last five years, it's pretty much remained the same," Rackley says. "Our mix changes a little bit, but for the most part we're set up to take care of foodservice."

Once unloaded from the dock and transported onto the conveyor, three kill lines process 140 birds per minute for a total of 420 birds per minute. Birds are then bled and go through pickers to remove feathers before the carcasses are dipped in a pathogen-preventing



Fieldale Farms' Murrayville, Georgia, facility covers 210,000 sq. ft. with room for future expansion.

bath while they are still warm. Rackley says the warmth of the bird ensures the pores are open, allowing for optimum penetration of the anti-pathogen solution. This represents an integral piece of Fieldale's commitment to safety for both food, and for its workers.

"Our main focus here is employee safety and food safety along with quality and customer service," Rackley says.

Currently, Fieldale employs two full-time safety coordinators and two helpers for worker safety with 60 quality assurance (QA) techs



Fieldale Farms employs two full-time safety coordinators and two helpers as part of its commitment to worker safety.

dedicated to food safety and quality control.

Inspection at the Murrayville plant is handled via the New Poultry Inspection System (NPIS). Rather than having the usual four US Dept. of Agriculture inspectors along the line, trained Fieldale employees assess birds coming down the line with inspectors at the end to look for anything missed upstream. The two inspectors rotate every hour. Rackley says the inspector not working the line is able to perform other food safety tasks such as taking samples to test for pathogens, lab checks, etc.

The Cornelia plant converted to NPIS in November 2015. “We converted in February of 2016,” Rackley says. “We had to rearrange our lines in order to make it work, but it’s worked well for us.”

For the Fieldale employees that act as inspectors, it’s a premium pay job. Their training comes from former USDA veterinarians and the Fieldale company veterinarian helps establish the training program and create a manual as well.

Fieldale is currently developing a mentor program that’s helping newly hired employees adjust to the work and understand the safety and quality goals of the company. In addition to new hires being trained by veteran workers, the mentoring program will include video training for new employees. The Murrayville plant will adopt the new program soon.

“It’s already started at two of the plants and it will get implemented here after we complete their processes,” Rackley says.

The company’s dedication to employee well-being, food safety and quality control have

earned it supplier of the year awards from multiple customers.

DETECTION AND PRODUCTION

For the past four years, Fieldale and Gainco, a local equipment supplier, have been developing a mutually beneficial relationship. Gainco provides Fieldale with two machines that play critical roles in the quality and volume the company produces. Anritsu x-ray machines ensure that bone fragments aren’t left in products. Gainco’s multi-functional trim tables give Fieldale a tool to monitor and measure productivity, as well as improve quality.

“We started looking for ways to improve our quality on our deboned meat, so we tested some equipment with Gainco and other vendors and we chose to go with Yield Plus and put the Anritsu x-ray behind the tables to verify that there were no bones left in the meat,” Rackley says. There are currently nine of the x-ray machines and five trim tables being used at Fieldale Farms’ operations.

“The trim table weighs the product going to each individual trimmer, and we’re able to track performance by each individual. We track them by yield, pounds per man hour, pieces per minute, total pounds produced and quality.”

Fieldale employees have access to the data anytime via dashboard-like screens mounted in the breakroom and on the processing line. Employees use this data to track their own performance.

The high-tech tables work in tandem with the yield scanning system. Developed by Georgia Tech Univ., Yield Scan takes a picture of the carcass and measures the meat left. Monitors on the line and in the breakroom display the results of each table.

A lighting system similar to traffic lights measure performance at a glance. Red light is poor, a yellow light is “getting there” and a green light indicates high performance.

Over the years Fieldale has added equipment and automation to meet demand, but it’s always been a decision based on needs and return on investment. In the past five years, due to labor issues and the ability to produce more volume, the Murrayville facility has added two Meyn, mechanical deboners.

“We’re always looking to improve through new equipment or different technologies,” Rackley says. “We’re always looking for that

and we’re reviewing the next generation of mechanical equipment to see if there’s any merit and benefit to us putting it into this facility.”

While the mechanical deboners represent 35 percent of the plant’s deboning process, Rackley says management still prefers hand deboning. “Mechanical is getting close, but we still get a better yield with hand,” he says. However, manual deboning capacity is limited to about 42 fronts per minute, while automated deboning increases capacity up to 100 fronts per minute, Rackley adds.

The Murrayville plant runs six cone lines for manual deboning with 11 employees per line. All six lines operate on the night shift while four operate on the day shift. Breasts and tenders are pulled and cut while wings get sent to a cutting wheel that splits them into three cuts and then they’re graded, bagged and boxed.

CHALLENGES AND CHANGES

Fieldale Farms faces many of the challenges that all poultry manufacturers face, and one that’s trending through the entire industry – as well as other industries – is labor. It seems that low unemployment, competition from other poultry plants in the area and the opening of an Amazon warehouse in the county slated for the near future, have Fieldale and other businesses in Hall County, Georgia, coming up short on help.

“In this area, there are a lot of poultry plants,” Rackley says. “So, we’re all competing for the same labor.”

At only 3.25 percent unemployment in Hall County, anyone that is willing and able to work already is, Rackley says. He adds that when the rate is that low, the only people left are those who don’t want to work, can’t work, or are always in transition from one job to another.

“Even the local restaurants, hotels, everybody is suffering for labor,” Rackley says. “Every industry in the county and surrounding counties have signs up everywhere needing labor.”

Many companies answer the challenge of scarce labor through automation. When a company needs to grow but lacks a labor pool to draw from and support and sustain that growth, automation is often the answer.

Currently, Fieldale’s Cornelia plant is going through an expansion and renovation to add square footage for additional equipment and production. “They’re adding automation



Plant manager David Rackley monitors one of nine Anritsu x-ray machines that ensure products contain no foreign matter.

and equipment to improve their processes,” Rackley says. And the Murrayville plant will see expansion soon as well.

“We are looking to expand this plant for future growth and automation,” Rackley adds. The Murrayville plant has plenty of land to build on and will just add square footage to the existing facility.

While Fieldale’s Murrayville plant is now utilizing electric stunning, Rackley acknowledges the trend toward controlled atmosphere stunning (CAS) in the industry. As more restaurant groups switch to the Global Animal Partnership (GAP) guidelines, which include CAS, Fieldale will consider switching over. “There are a lot of people switching, so we’re going to look at it to see,” he says. “As far as the company making a decision that, ‘yes, we’re going to it next year or in two years,’ I don’t know that. All I know is that we’ll be looking at it.”

Rackley started his career with Fieldale Farms in 1999 as a supervisor and over the years has performed many duties and seen many changes as he has worked his way up to the plant manager position. “I started out as a supervisor and then switched over to tray-pack manager,” Rackley says. “Then I became second processing superintendent, then assistant plant manager and then plant manager in 2010.”

Through the years he’s seen plenty of changes and expects more. Rackley remains loyal to his employer of 18 years. “Fieldale is a great company to work for,” he says. “They believe in taking care of their employees.” 