



This Agriculture Note provides information on emus and the industry.

Product

Emu farming commenced in Western Australia in 1970. This first venture failed, and the industry proceeded slowly until the early 1990s, when the other states of Australia, including Victoria passed legislation to allow Emu farming. The last few years have seen farming move ahead with an explosion of the number of birds being farmed. Markets are being established throughout the world, with the main focus being on Europe, Japan and the United States. All parts of the emu are used, comprising meat, leather and oil.

Emu meat has been well accepted by taste panels and has found its way onto selected restaurant menus in Victoria.

Emu leather is a new product, which displays quilling all over the skin. Acceptance by the fashion industry may take a while as it will be competing against the established Ostrich and Rhea leather markets.

Emu oil has been used in aboriginal medicine for thousands of years, as a remedy for joint pain, skin disorders and as an antiseptic for cuts. Its main medical potential appears to lie in its ability to carry other products through the skin, but more research is needed to verify the claims. Cosmetic product lines have been developed and are being successfully marketed. Massage oils and liniments are particularly popular. If any medical benefits of significance were found, it would provide an even larger market potential.

There is a limited market for feathers and claws as garment decorations and souvenirs.

Blown eggs are sold domestically and may also have export potential. There has been a resurgence in the art of egg carving with some works selling for \$500 or more.

Physical Requirements

Emu farming is now legal in all states of Australia, and a permit is required to keep them everywhere but Tasmania. In Victoria an annual licence has to be purchased from the Department of Primary Industries. Emus are either run in pairs or in free-range groups. Boundary fences need to be 1.9m high, but internal fences can be lower depending on management needs. Emus are suited to grazing on an open range, of natural bushland. In a farmed situation pasture

alone is not enough and emus need to be fed grain as well, particularly to maximise oil production, and to achieve satisfactory growth rates. Attention needs to be paid to fence design and layout. Fences running straight down hill will become pads that will be open to erosion. Stocking rates for adult birds in Victoria are set at 16/ha, but birds under 18 months of age may be heavily stocked.

Most farms of the original emu farms in Victoria have bred and raised their birds, through to slaughter. As the industry matures there may be an increasing tendency to specialise, with individual farmers participating in one aspect of production. These phases are breeding/incubating, brooding, raising juveniles and grow out. The capital expenditure required for incubating and brooding will far exceed that required on a grow-out farm. There is also an opportunity for farmers to assist and manage flocks for other breeders or investors. This can provide cash flow for a mixed farming enterprise without exposure to the production and market risk of an emerging industry.

Production

Most emu farmers run breeding pairs in pens that measure about 50m by 30m. An alternative method is to allow free-range colonies of not more than 16 adult birds per hectare. Breeders are fed a high fibre poultry layer diet, or many custom mixes are now produced specifically for emus.

In January of each year, all birds (approximately 16 - 19 months old) that have been set aside for breeding purposes are vent sexed for positive gender identification. Their legs can be tagged for ease of visual understanding. After a period of time in free-range conditions, compatible pairs are moved to smaller pens where egg laying will begin from May onwards. Each pen includes a feed container (filled weekly), water point, and shade/wind barrier. Pairs may need to be shifted if fighting occurs from one pen to the next. Emus need to pair off themselves, as not all pairs are compatible.

Egg production usually starts around the end of April and continues until the end of September. Females produce between 10 and 20 eggs on average, with more and less being recorded. Natural and artificial incubation can be used, but it is generally considered that artificial incubation is the most efficient. Chicks are raised artificially after hatching, so suitable shedding and heating for brooding are needed.

Hygiene of nesting areas and incubation is essential as most losses occur from rotten eggs, 2-4 week old chicks and again at the rapid growth phase of 12 to 14 weeks.

Major skin damage from cuts and scratches can be caused by the claws of emus, during paddock interaction and transport. Most farmers are considering the need to de-claw, to reduce the risk of damage to both operators and birds. Emus are temperamental and can be difficult to handle and to transport. Better handling and transport methods will develop over time. A lot of literature is now available from the Emu Producers Association of Victoria and many farmers with several years experiences are willing to help newcomers to the industry.

Marketing

Emu is a new product and market development will take a few more years yet. Australian Emu Industries (AEI) is a national marketing body of the industry, concerned with product development, quality assurance and export. Unlike the ostrich industry that has a single marketing arm (The Australian Ostrich Company), the emu industry is open slather, with many businesses trying to operate at the product end of the industry. Only time will tell if this approach is the best one.

Victoria has several meatworks slaughtering emus. The cost of slaughter is currently extremely high (\$70+) but it is hoped this figure will reduce as volume increases. A number of Victorian game meat wholesalers have landed large export meat contracts but the going remains tough. A major airline contract was cancelled because of lobbying by animal rights activists in New York.

Skins are often damaged, which renders them worthless, but there have been signs of positive interest from Europe for good quality skins. Emu oil is the product that stands emu apart from other livestock. If only half of the claims of emu oils properties could be verified, it could well become a boom commodity. A lot of research and development still needs to be done with emu oil, but many producers are confident their economic viability will come from oil.

Financial aspects

The emu industry is experiencing very tough times. After rapid growth in the early nineties, numbers have exploded, with Victoria becoming a major emu producing state. Industry predictions are that profits will be elusive for 18 months to several years. Most abattoirs are currently concentrating on meat and profitability will probably only come from the combination of meat, hide and oil.

With continuing high grain prices it costs more than \$150 to raise a bird for slaughter. It will produce about eight kilograms of meat and a skin value of about \$50. The emu industry is in a similar situation to the deer industry when it emerged from its breeder phase. Oil will hopefully help

the emu industry in the way velvet antler has helped the deer industry. The emu industry also has a strong nucleus of dedicated producers who believe strongly in their product, and are prepared to tough out this development phase.

Organisations and contacts

Emu Producers Association of Victoria
Royal Melbourne Showgrounds,
Epsom Rd, Ascot Vale, 3032
Ph 03 9281 7438
Fax 03 9376 2973

Emu Processing Facilities in Victoria
Alberton Exotic Meats, Yarram (Emdeeru P/L)(VMA)
Jeff Key 03 5182 5318
Peter Gooding 03 5146 4309

Glenloth Game, Wycheproof (VMA) (AQIS approved)
Export processing facility
Ian Milburn 03 5493 7383

Goldfield Turkeys (AQIS approved)
Ken Grenfell 03 5495 1666

The EMU Company Pty Ltd. Myrtleford
Export facility.
Robert Cavedon 03 5756 2999

Pyramid Hill Processing P/L. (AQIS approved)
Export facility
John Atkinson 03 5455 7445 (process manager)
John Reid 03 5447 1222

Emu Marketing Australia Pty Ltd. (AQIS approved)
Rob Armstrong, 03 5352 5724 (General Manager)
David Milne, 03 5435 7422 (Process Manager)

References

Emu Producers Association of Victoria
Royal Melbourne Showgrounds,
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Phone: 03 9281 7438 , Fax 03 9376 2973

"Emu Farming", compiled by Peter Smetana, (1994).
Department of Agriculture, Western Australia.

Inquiry into the Utilisation of Victorian Native Flora and Fauna Report Chapter 4, [EMU FARMING](#)

White, Denis 2001, [Adding Value to Emu Co-Products](#), RIRDC, Publication No. 01/089

Michael, David 2000, [Bench Marks for New Animal Products: Emu and Ostrich Production](#), RIRDC, Publication No. 00/136

Several other reports of interest are available from; New Animal Products Research Reports, [RIRDC](#)

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