



# Hen master

Story and photos by  
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Former minister Stephen Felts is building a business in Maury County as a producer of all-natural poultry products, including eggs and broilers. His and wife Danika's Fresh Earth Farm is also moving into pick-your-own fruits and grass-fed beef.

## Columbia's Stephen Felts produces all-natural eggs and poultry with Co-op feed and God-given talent on his Fresh Earth Farm

**C**lucking chickens casually scratch and peck in the dirt near a time-worn, 160-year-old barn tucked into the crevice of a Maury County hollow. Just inside the doorway, several caramel-brown hens occupy a cubicle of laying boxes. Recently vacated nests contain piles of fresh eggs awaiting collection.

In the doorway, a large, strutting, glossy-black rooster pauses for dramatic effect. He inflates his chest and lets loose with a long-winded crow, finishing hoarsely with a flourish of flapping wings.

Columbia

Were it not for the distant drone of an overhead jet airplane, a visitor might believe they'd stepped through a portal in time to early 20th-century America. At first glance, the 85-acre farm's poultry operation is about as far removed from modern production agriculture as it could be.

And that's just how Stephen Felts wants it.

"Our goal here is to pro-

duce all-natural poultry products, including eggs and broilers. His and wife Danika's Fresh Earth Farm is also moving into pick-your-own fruits and grass-fed beef.

customer of Maury Farmers Cooperative. To that end, Stephen, wife Danika, and the couple's children, Luc, 12, and Kate, 10, are quickly building a local following for their all-natural, cage-free poultry and eggs, an operation they began only three years ago.

"This is a family business, and all of us are involved," says Stephen, a Memphis-area native. "We serve around 50 families and have several more on a waiting list."

The Feltses' farm is one of a growing number of Tennessee operations that focus on either certified-organic or all-natural products and market directly to the consumer instead of working through a distributor and retailer.

"More than ever, people want to know where their food comes from, who produced it, and how it was raised," says Stephen. "My grandparents were sharecroppers, and I've always felt an affinity for this type of work. We purchased this place with the belief that we had an opportunity to fill a niche for all-natural farm products in this area and, so far, our

century methods to produce high-quality poultry products, including the use of chicken "tractors" — 8-by-10-foot wood, tin, and wire structures that allow up to 70 chickens at a time to graze on pasture ground without being exposed to predators.

"Tractors provide [broiler chickens] the opportunity to access the grasses, bugs, and minerals in the soil without worrying about coyotes and bobcats," says Stephen, who has built three tractors for his operation and tops out his production at 210 birds at a time. "They are fairly new management tools for poultry produc-

ers and are key components of our operation."

While in the tractors, which are moved to a fresh plot of pasture daily, the chickens also receive plenty of fresh water and a custom, soy-free and grain-based 20-percent poultry feed developed by Tennessee Farmers Cooperative nutritionist Dr. Paul Davis.

"We developed this feed out of necessity," says Paul. "There is a strong, well-documented trend in our industry toward natural, locally grown food products, and Co-op is excited to be a part of this. The Feltses' formulation is designed to be a well-balanced supplement to the nutrients cage-free poultry get through grazing. It contains no antibiotics, medications, or mammal-based proteins, which works well with the more natural, lower-stress lifestyle of the birds in this type of operation."

Stephen purchases his hybrid broiler chicks — Cornish X Rocks — from hatcheries in Iowa and Ohio and raises them in a brood house to 3 weeks of age, after which they are transferred to tractors until the processing age of 9 weeks. After the Feltses hand-process the broilers, customers either pick up the meat — and eggs — on the farm or at locations in Spring Hill and Franklin.

"This summer, we plan to carry our broilers to a [U.S. Department of Agriculture-] inspected processing facility in Kentucky," says Stephen. "This will allow us to expand our customer base even more because, as it stands now, we can't hand-



process our broilers any faster. We want to be sure that we don't grow so quickly that our customer service suffers."

Stephen says the family's egg business, which traditionally slows down during winter months, will soon pick up as the laying hens begin to increase production when temperatures warm and daylight hours lengthen.

"Hens need about 14 hours of daylight per day to produce eggs," he explains. "In the winter, we have to supplement a little with artificial light, and even then, production drops off some. It's just the nature of the business."

The Feltse's usually overwinter around 125 laying hens, a number that will more than double later in the year. Although they purchase most of their layers — Red and Black Stars and Barred Rocks — from hatcheries, some originate from a homegrown Tennessee source.

"As much as we can, we supplement our hatchery layers by purchasing from local 4-H'ers participating in chicken projects," he says. "About the time their hens are ready to show is when they begin laying eggs. It works out well in most cases because we know the chickens have been well taken care of."

Within a couple of years, Stephen says, Fresh Earth Farm may actually be hosting 4-H'ers, FFA students, and other youth groups as a farm-education facility. The Feltse's have already planted a small apple, pear, and peach orchard as well as blueberries, blackberries, and strawberries. Stephen plans to clear more timber to create enough pasture acreage to support a grass-fed beef operation, too.

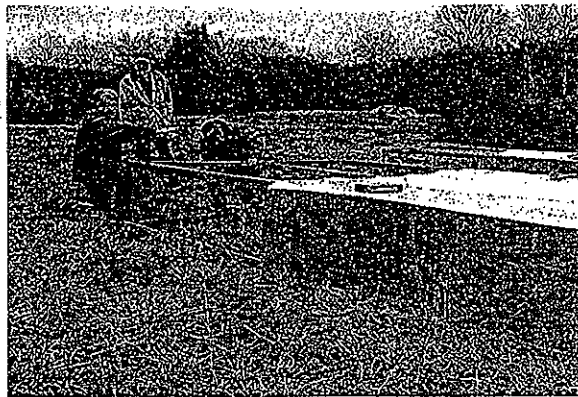
"We really want to utilize every inch of this property and be good stewards," he says. "Our cattle operation is on hold until we can provide a consistent water supply. I'm currently working with the National Resources Conservation Service to take care of that challenge."

A longtime minister, Stephen says his ultimate goal is to construct a one-room schoolhouse/church on the property as the farm's centerpiece.

"We want to not only be

able to teach people about agriculture, but also about God through Creation," he says. "I spent 25 years in Christian ministries, and I view my career now as a way to feed people in a different way. I've been blessed to have been provided both opportunities!"

For more information about the Feltse's operation, visit [www.freshearthfarm.com](http://www.freshearthfarm.com) or call Stephen at 931-380-5522. To learn more about Co-op poultry-related products, contact the professionals at your local Co-op.



Stephen, left, discusses the operation of an 8-by-10-foot chicken "tractor" with Maury Farmers Cooperative salesman Royce Collins, center, and Tennessee Cooperative feed and animal health specialist John Houston.

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