

# RAFI-USA

Rural Advancement Foundation International - USA

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274 Pittsboro Elem. Sch. Rd. • PO Box 640 • Pittsboro, NC 27312 • Tel: 919-542-1396 • Fax: 919-542-0069 • www.rafiusa.org

## Developing a Farm Plan for a Mass Poultry Mortality

Becky Ceartas, Contract Agriculture Reform Program Director, RAFI-USA

For poultry growers, the dreaded sound of the poultry house alarm going off means lost income and days of work ahead. Growers can reduce the costs of mass poultry mortalities and protect themselves from future liability by creating a disposal plan in advance.

Heat, natural disaster, equipment failure, or disease can all cause unusually high poultry mortality. Farmers should create plan for each of these four situations, since the best option varies. Methods of disposal for mortalities due to avian influenza must be determined with the integrator and the state veterinarian at the time of the death.

North Carolina state law requires dead poultry be disposed of within 24 hours in a manner approved by the state veterinarian. There are six main options for disposing of a mass mortality. Each has advantages and disadvantages. For example, landfill burial and rendering may not be suitable for a mass mortality due to disease.

**Burial** is quick but is not recommended in the coastal plain and where the water table is high. It can contaminate soil and water. Burial sites must be at least three feet below the ground surface, three feet above the seasonable high water table, and 300 feet away from an existing stream or public body of water. For assistance in determining the seasonal high water table, contact your local health department or local Soil and Water Conservation District office. A record of the location of the approved site and the burial history, which includes the date, species, head count and age, must be kept by the owner and reported to the Local Health Director. Burial sites should be disclosed if the land is later sold to avoid potential liability issues.

**Landfill burial** is less environmentally risky but can be very expensive and may not be allowed in all areas and with some diseases. Call your county landfill to see if it accepts mass quantities of dead chickens, how much the tipping fee is per ton, and if transportation is available.

**Rendering** applies heat to carcasses to convert them into useful commercial products. Rendering does not affect the land, but may be impractical and expensive for large numbers of birds. Call Becky Ceartas, 919-542-1396 ext. 209, to find the plant nearest to you. Call the rendering plant to find out the maximum number of birds they would take at a time, transportation fees, and any other costs and restrictions.

**Composting** is simple, inexpensive and biosecure. It produces a useful end-product. NCDA&CS is in the process of investigating the possibility of outdoor composting or in facilities normally not used for composting that might be used in times of emergency. Call Dr. Sarah Mason at the State Veterinarian's office, 919-733-7601, to learn more.

**Contained incineration** efficiently eliminates poultry disease agents but can be expensive because of the high cost of fuel. Farmers with incinerators may be able to dispose of smaller mass mortalities by storing the dead birds on pallets in a refrigeration unit until they can be systematically incinerated. To find a refrigeration unit contact your integrator or trailer rental company.

A **gasification** unit is a contained system that uses high heat to vaporize animal carcasses. It is less harmful to the environment than incineration. It also requires a refrigeration unit to handle mass mortalities.

By planning ahead, farmers can deal with poultry mortality in a way that is less costly, best for their land and their families, and within the law. All plans should be reviewed with your integrator for suggestions and approval requirements particular to your integrator.

