

CONSIDERATIONS FOR ALTERNATIVE USES OF OLD POULTRY BARNs

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Purpose of This Publication

This publication is intended to help begin the conversation around the often-asked question, “What can I do with an old poultry barn?” It is intended to help develop a pathway for generating ideas. It is not intended to prescribe solutions or thoroughly evaluate the income potential of any enterprise. Even though “What can I do with an old poultry barn?” is often asked, there are not a lot of answers, at least not direct and specific answers. Finding an alternative use for an old poultry barn is more of a process or a journey than a specific answer or solution. This document is intended to help prepare to navigate the process.

The information provided here is based on the perspectives and experiences of the authors. The information presented here is not the result of a research project nor is it based on survey results or a thorough review of literature on the subject. The ideas, suggestions and listings here are simply based on the experiences, conversations and observations of the authors.

Introduction

Over the years, an often-asked question that we in Extension have received from farmers and landowners is “What can I do with my old poultry barn?” Sometimes this question comes from a new landowner who has acquired property containing a barn previously used for poultry production, and sometimes the question comes from the landowner who is no longer raising poultry. While we have considered this question many times, there are very few uses that have been adopted on one farm that seem easily replicated on another farm. In other words, an old poultry barn is rarely the most limiting factor for another enterprise. The barn itself as well as much of the infrastructure that supports it is very specific to poultry production and specific to the technology and growing practices at the time the structure was built or last utilized. So much so that very few alternative uses may exist and if one farm finds a suitable and successful alternative, it would be rare that the alternative would be easily replicated for success on another farm.

While actually finding a successful alternative use for an old poultry barn may seem dismal, there is a pathway that may help improve the likelihood that alternative ideas are generated and a possible future use of a poultry barn is identified. We suggest a four-step process to include:

1. Assess the resources
2. Brainstorm
3. Categorize alternative uses
4. Prioritize/rank ideas and input

Assess the Resource

As a first step, the structural integrity of the building should be evaluated. In some instances, the structure itself could be obsolete, unsafe and/or deemed useless in its existing form. In some cases, the individual materials could be more valuable than the structure itself.

Once the decision is made that the structure itself is safe and useful, it will likely be helpful to specifically define what resources are available. We suggest a description beyond “old poultry barn.” Elaborating and expanding on a description of the available resources will help evaluate alternatives, and it will help communicate with others exactly what resource is being considered for utilization. Consider including the following details:

- Dimensions (interior length, width and height)
- Year constructed
- Current condition
- Location (proximity to road frontage, proximity to town, proximity to interstate...)
- Roof type/condition
- Type of walls/sides and condition
- Interior floor (concrete pad or dirt)
- Internal utilities (water, electricity and gas)
- Internal barn infrastructure such as working waterers and feeders, non-working waterers and feeders
- External infrastructure such as roads, parking, fencing, access to creek/pond and feed mill

Describe Your Poultry Barn

This image shows a single sheet of white paper with horizontal blue ruling lines. The lines are evenly spaced and run across the width of the page. There are no margins, text, or other markings on the paper.

Brainstorm

After a clear and narrowly defined description of the barn is prepared, plan to generate ideas for alternative uses. We suggest brainstorming, which, generally speaking, is the process of generating ideas in a rapid manner where there is no assessment of good or bad, practical or impractical, or likely to succeed or fail. The focus of brainstorming is to generate a volume of ideas. Save sorting and critiquing the ideas for later. In the brainstorming phase, just focus on generating ideas.

Brainstorming can occur while driving down the road, plowing a field or feeding livestock, or multiple brainstorming sessions with family, close friends, industry advisors or other groups may be planned. Regardless of the number of brainstorming sessions conducted and regardless of how many folks are included in the process, we suggest that a written list of ideas be kept. You never know which idea might spark another idea which might lead to a successful enterprise.

A brainstorming session may help generate alternative ideas for uses of an old poultry barn such as:

- Hay storage (for farm use)
- Hay storage (for sales)
- Other poultry production (guineas, pheasants, geese, quail, peacocks, turkey)
- Equipment storage
- Rabbits
- Goats
- Horse boarding
- Bait worms

The objective of the brainstorming phase is to generate ideas...lots and lots of ideas.

List Your Ideas

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Categorize Alternative Uses

After a variety of ideas are generated through brainstorming sessions, consider categorizing the ideas according to those that generate income and those that don't generate income. For instance, using an old poultry barn for equipment storage might be very helpful to the farm enterprise, but it won't generate income for the farm. On the other hand, converting the barn to use in raising rabbits for sale to the public would add a revenue stream to the farm operation. Categorizing by income generating versus non-income generating at this phase does not necessarily mean that an income-generating idea will be profitable; it simply means that it offers income potential.

When folks divide their ideas by income-generating and non-income generating, it oftentimes helps generate additional ideas to be considered. And categorizing this way also helps to make an eventual decision, especially if a non-income generating idea is selected.

When categorizing ideas, the list may look something like this:

- Income-generating
 - Indoor growing (vertical farming, LED lighting...)
 - Strawberries
 - Mushrooms
 - Rabbits
 - Sheep
 - Hemp
 - Aquaculture (baitfish)
 - Worms
 - Turkeys
 - Feed store
 - Restaurant
 - Event venue
 - Equipment storage on a rental basis
- Non-income generating
 - Hay storage
 - Farm shop
 - Equipment storage
 - Feed storage
 - Antique equipment showplace/storage/museum

A feature article and infographic from the University of Delaware discusses research growing strawberries in an old poultry barn. Additional information is available online at:

<https://www.udel.edu/udaily/2024/june/strawberries-poultry-houses-sweet-solution/>

<https://www.udel.edu/academics/colleges/canr/cooperative-extension/first-state-impacts/converting-poultry-houses-22/>

Categorize Your Ideas

Prioritize/Rank Ideas and Input

In many cases, the prioritization and ranking of brainstormed ideas should be preceded by an honest view and assessment of the overall financial position of the farm. The question about how much money is available or could be borrowed to invest in an alternative use of the structure should be considered early. And so should the question about how an alternative use of the structure will fit or connect with the rest of the farm. Is the alternate use of the barn complementary to existing farm activities, or is it a completely new enterprise?

At this stage, assume scores of ideas have been generated and categorized by those that generate income and those that do not generate income. Now it is time to prioritize the ideas. This is where questions should be asked about the likelihood of success, profit potential, risk, marketability, labor requirements, regulations, additional investment, lifespan of the enterprise and so on. Some folks choose to develop a table of these types of criteria and evaluate each criterion for each enterprise idea. Others will simply sort the idea list, quickly culling some ideas and leaving others for deeper consideration. Still others will choose to either rate each idea using a scale (such as 1 to 5) or rank the list of ideas in descending order where 1 emerges as the top or best idea and larger ranked ideas are lower priority.

Most folks do not have enough time or access to detailed information about every possible idea that they can afford to dissect the pros and cons or profit potential of each and every brainstormed idea. The objective of the prioritization phase is to narrow the focus to a manageable set of one or two ideas that can be thoroughly studied and vetted.

Prioritize Your Ideas

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Oftentimes folks desire to find an income-generating idea for their old poultry barn, but they end up settling for a non-income generating idea after they feel they have thoroughly exhausted the search and prioritized with little success. This process may make the selection of a non-income generating idea more acceptable.

Going Beyond the Idea Phase

After an exhaustive list of ideas has been brainstormed, categorized and prioritized, time can be invested in a more thorough analysis of costs, income, risk, marketability and profit potential. Whether the top idea is to use the barn for equipment storage and the only action needed is to add a few pieces of roofing metal and add a few hinged doors or if the top idea is to start a baitfish business requiring a \$500,000 investment and development of a new market, carefully evaluating and analyzing the costs and details at this phase will likely prove most helpful.

Prepare for this phase to take a while and may require a great deal of reading, research and relying on others for input and information. For example, there may not be a readily accessible enterprise budget for raising and marketing baitfish in the local community, so finding and tweaking or developing an enterprise budget from scratch could take some time.

Summary

There are many barns across Tennessee that were originally built according to precise specifications for raising poultry. As construction specifications change over time and as new technology and infrastructure is used, barns that were built and used for poultry will eventually stop being used to raise poultry. Oftentimes when no longer used to raise poultry, the structures still provide usefulness and cause owners to consider alternative uses. The best alternative use for an old poultry barn may vary by several factors, and a preferred use by one owner may not be easily replicated by another owner. Finding a good alternative use for an old poultry barn is not always easy. The process of considering alternative uses of old poultry barns may be eased when a written description of the barn/resource is developed then ideas are brainstormed, categorized and prioritized.



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