

Zimbabwean success story spreads over Africa

For nearly 50 years the name of the Irvine family in Zimbabwe has been synonymous with successful poultry production. Recent times have provided interesting challenges for Zimbabweans and for the Irvine's in particular. They have risen to the occasion and the result is Irvine's Africa – a poultry business that has now stretched out of Zimbabwe to become a leading supplier of day old broiler chicks across most of sub-saharan Africa.

To find out more about this interesting story International Hatchery Practice recently spoke to Craig Irvine.

Proven track record

Irvine's Day Old Chicks, as the original company is known, has operated in Zimbabwe for many years and was actually featured in an article in International Hatchery Practice about 10 years ago.

The company has been a major producer of poultry meat and table eggs in Zimbabwe for many years and had been doing limited exports for some 30 years.

It currently processes some 200,000 Cobb 500 broilers a week and has 750,000 H&N Brown Nick table egg layers in production.

In 1995 David Irvine, Craig's father, saw that the future had to be more than just the Zimbabwean market and the company's march into Sub Saharan



Farm isolation is a key aspect of biosecurity.

Africa began. Today, Irvine's Africa exports Cobb and H&N parent stock to over a dozen countries including Malawi, Mozambique, Congo, Kenya, Tanzania, Uganda, Ghana, Cameroon, Nigeria, Botswana, Angola and Namibia.

In addition, table eggs are shipped to Malawi, Mozambique, South Africa and the Democratic Republic of Congo and frozen chickens are exported to South Africa, Malawi and Mozambique using the company's own refrigerated lorries.

The company receives day old grand-parent stock chicks for its broiler and table egg operations from Cobb and H&N respectively and these are reared in Zimbabwe and then go into production. The resulting eggs are set in the company's parent hatchery which has 12 Petersime 84 setters.

Controlled environment in rear

The resulting day old parent stock chicks are then placed on the company's own breeder rearer and layer farms in Zimbabwe, of which there are six of each, or are exported.

In Zimbabwe all GP rearing is done in controlled environment houses but most of the other houses used for the breeding operation are open sided. In the future it is likely that some breeder farms will be located closer to customers in their countries so as to remove some of the challenges associated with the shipment

of hatching eggs between countries in Africa.

Irvine's has commercial hatching capacity for some 700,000 chicks a week and operates 33 Jamesway Big J incubators. All the breeder farms are located within 40km of the hatcheries. In addition, the company also runs a new state of the art hatchery in Botswana that also uses Jamesway machines. All of Irvine's Africa's activities are co-ordi-

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nated through the company's office in South Africa.

Today, David Irvine is still at the helm but he is assisted by son Craig who focuses on marketing and technical issues, Tizayi Faranasi, who is responsible for production matters, and Dr Daz Karenga who is a veterinarian and is responsible for health issues.

When it comes to exports, state veterinarians are responsible for official monitoring of flocks and the certification of export shipments. On top of this, Irvine's have to meet the stringent requirements that Cobb and H&N place on franchise breeders.

Imported grandparent chicks are mycoplasma and Salmonella enteritidis free and this status is retained by the company's strict biosecurity code.

Confirmation of the success of this is achieved by the company's rigorous and regular monitoring programme which is based on both blood and culture based testing.

The company's own laboratory employs four veterinarians and five technicians and is regularly inspected and audited. In addition, it participates in various external challenge testing (ring) programmes including Cobb's in house one for *S. enteritidis*, The University of Pretoria's Poultry Reference Centre's one

for serology and Rainbow SA's for feed analysis.

With the exception of avian influenza and leucosis J virus infection most other common poultry diseases are to be found in Zimbabwe and so heavy emphasis is placed on countering the threats of these by a comprehensive vaccination programme of all breeders. This focuses on controlling Newcastle disease, infectious bronchitis, Gumboro disease, coryza, Salmonella enteritidis infection, reovirus and mycoplasma infections.

Wealth of experience

One of the big pluses that Irvine's Africa can bring to customers across Africa is that they are not just suppliers of day olds and hatching eggs. They are a fully integrated operation and have experienced staff at all levels of the production chain from the hatchery to the processing plant whose expertise is available to customers.

For example, on the table egg front they produce four million brown table eggs a week that are all graded in a central egg packing plant that uses Moba egg grading equipment. These eggs are then distributed to supermarkets and other outlets across Zimbabwe from a central packing station.

On the broiler front the company operates a processing plant that uses Stork equipment and was upgraded to EU standards in 1996 and so is able to export finished products across Africa.

Currently some 1.0 million hatching eggs are produced per week and these are graded on farm and then shipped twice daily into the company's main hatchery in Harare. Here they are either used internally or are further graded and packed for export to the company's Botswana hatchery or to customers in neighbouring African states and some which are further afield such as those in Ghana.

Good early performance

So, how are the Cobb and H&N products performing on customers' farms across Africa? "Results vary between customers," Craig told us, "and this depends a lot on factors that are customer related such as housing, equipment used and the quality of locally available feeds. FCRs for Cobb broilers range from 1.65 to over 2.00 and typically weights of 1.8kg at 42 days are obtainable.

"The fairest way to evaluate how our Cobb 500 broilers are performing is not to compare them to international standards, but to compare their performance



H&N stock in rear and, right, Zimvet's staff regularly run training courses.

with the performance of other breeds in the country in question. On this basis the Cobb 500 is performing very well in terms of weight to 42 days, FCR and live-ability.

“On good farms first week mortality figures of under 1% are the norm.”

The first Cobb grandparents, the Cobb 100, were imported into Zimbabwe in 1962 and later Irvine's switched to the Cobb 500.

Today they have a Cobb franchise and its area covers all of Sub Saharan Africa except South Africa, which is serviced by Cobb South Africa.

Cobb rises to the challenge

This is a real challenge because there are some 860 million people in Africa who need to be fed, who need a better diet that contains more animal protein and who can not afford to be left behind by the developments in food production and processing that are occurring elsewhere in the world.

Thus, a modern broiler, such as the Cobb 500, with its fast growth rate and excellent FCR is ideal in that it is an efficient converter of the valuable stocks of maize and soya that there are in Africa.

This fact alone has resulted in a massive swing from indigenous poultry

breeds to modern broiler breeds in many African countries. Irvine's have capitalised on this and now in many African countries the Cobb 500 is the meat bird of choice.

In many African countries eggs and poultry meat are the cheapest sources of animal protein and breeds such as H&N and Cobb have a key role to play in developing realistic and sustainable poultry industries in the countries of Africa.

As Irvine's advanced into Africa it became very apparent that their customers needed much more than just day olds or hatching eggs and their business developed so that, if required, Irvine's could also supply premixes and concentrates, vaccines, disinfectants, incubators, poultry house equipment and small scale processing plants and feed mills.

On the incubator front Irvine's are Jamesway's largest African customer as well as their distributor for Sub Saharan Africa. Irvine's own and operate three Jamesway hatcheries of their own and these provide a source of competent staff for commissioning new hatcheries or for training purposes.

Obviously as Irvine's also supply their Jamesway customers with hatching eggs there is a real motivation to get everything associated with the installation of the Jamesway machines spot on!

The Zimvet Veterinary Laboratory, which is wholly owned by Irvine's, services all the health monitoring and veterinary needs of Irvine's own operation in Zimbabwe, but is also available to help customers, for example in the design of their vaccination programmes.

In co-operation with Immuno Vet Services from South Africa, Zimvet is able to supply its customers with disinfectants and tailor made disinfection programmes for their particular situations.

So what about the future?

Success brings benefits

The challenges of Africa are great, but Irvine's have the expertise, the experience and the resources to rise to them. Success is not just success for the company it also brings great benefits to the people associated with the company.

Currently some 550 families are dependent on Irvine's who provide modern staff villages, primary school education for their children and operate two company clinics that are staffed by qualified nurses.

Given the proverbial level playing field, Irvine's Africa has much to bring to Africa and Africa has much to gain from Irvine's Africa. Time alone will tell how much of this will be achieved. ■

H & N pullets and the importance of good vaccination technique.

