Industry Expert Interview - Retired Consultant (NZ poultry - broiler

background)

Interviewee: Geoff Whitlock - semi-retired poultry industry advisor; ex-Tegel (1992-2014)

Background: Procurement and operations advisory roles across NZ + Asia poultry; semi-retired since 2018

Interviewer: Iris Beaumont (Halberd Capital Partners - Research)

Date: Wednesday, 7 May 2026

Duration: 32 minutes

Format: Phone call (Wellington / New York); recording transcribed by I.B.

Anonymisation: None - interviewee consented to attributed transcript

[00:00:11]

I.B.: Geoff - thanks for taking the call. We're doing some industry research on the NZ shell egg market and I'm canvassing industry views on the layer side. I understand your background is more in broiler / poultry meat than eggs, but you've been around the NZ industry a long time and I wanted to get your read.

[00:00:48]

Whitlock: Happy to. Yeah, my background's mainly broiler - I was at Tegel from '92 through to 2014, started in procurement, finished as a senior advisor. So I know the NZ poultry scene generally but I haven't been close to the layer market specifically for, oh, probably the last 8 or 10 years. I'll caveat everything with that. But fire away.

[00:01:32]

I.B.: Right, understood. So just to set the table - curious whether you have any current view on the broader NZ layer industry, the producer roster, anything along those lines.

[00:01:54]

Whitlock: Sure. Look, I'll tell you where my head goes on this. The NZ poultry industry, when I started in the early '90s, was a totally different beast. You had Tegel obviously, you had Inghams just starting to come in on the broiler side, and on the egg side you had a much more fragmented market - lots of regional producers, not the consolidation you see now. I remember in '94, '95, we were still buying spent layers from a half-dozen different operators in the lower North Island alone. Now you'd be lucky to find three of those still trading.

[00:02:54]

I.B.: OK - but in terms of the current producer set, the names that are active today -

[00:03:02]

Whitlock: Yeah, yeah. Mainland's the big one obviously. Has been for a long time. I remember when their procurement was being run by - oh, what was his name - chap called Brian, used to be at Heinz before he went over. Brian Murchison, I think. He was sharp. Anyway. Mainland's the biggest. After that, honestly, I'd be guessing on current shares. The market's moved a lot since the cage ban came in and I haven't tracked it closely.

[00:03:48]

I.B.: What about Heyden Farms, Better Eggs, Zeagold, Henergy?

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Whitlock: All names I know. Heyden's been around forever. Zeagold I think Navis was in, weren't they? Or was that Mainland. Maybe both - I can't remember. Better Eggs and Henergy I know less well. Look, I'm being honest with you, Iris - I'm not your guy for current producer shares. If you're triangulating volume share you'd want someone closer to the current market.

[00:04:42]

I.B.: Fair enough. Let me try a different angle. Given your broader poultry industry view, anything in terms of supply-chain dynamics, feed costs, anything cross-cutting that would affect a layer business?

[00:05:01]

Whitlock: Yeah, I can speak to some of that. Feed's the big one - feed conversion ratios for layers run differently from broilers obviously, but the input costs are correlated. NZ doesn't grow much soy, so you're importing soybean meal, mostly out of Argentina and the US. There's been a lot of volatility in the global feed complex over the last three or four years. Wheat prices have been all over the place. I was reading some Rabobank piece a while back - might have been last year - about how the global egg industry's feed margin has compressed substantially. Doesn't surprise me. Feed's two-thirds of an egg producer's variable cost, traditionally.

[00:06:18]

I.B.: Two-thirds - that's a number you'd stand behind?

[00:06:24]

Whitlock: Roughly. Could be a touch lower now with feed prices coming off, maybe 60%. But it's the dominant variable input. Not specific to NZ - applies globally. Cal-Maine in the US, all the European producers, same dynamic.

[00:07:02]

I.B.: Speaking of broader poultry markets - anything happening in Asia or Europe that's relevant?

[00:07:11]

Whitlock: Oh, plenty. Where do you want me to start? China's been fascinating. They've been consolidating their egg industry over the past decade - used to be hundreds of thousands of small producers, now you've got large vertically-integrated operators emerging. There was a piece in Asian Poultry Magazine maybe two years ago - I subscribe still, force of habit - about a Shandong producer that's running something like 8 million layers across multiple sites. That's bigger than the entire NZ flock by some margin. Different game entirely. The Chinese government has been pushing automation hard, real interesting industrial policy.

[00:08:32]

I.B.: And in Vietnam, Thailand, that region -

[00:08:38]

Whitlock: Vietnam's interesting because they had a big avian influenza outbreak - I think it was 2022 or 2023, can't remember exactly - that wiped out a chunk of layer capacity. CP Foods has been expanding aggressively there, pushing into the layer side from their broiler dominance. Thailand similar. The whole Southeast Asian region is following the China pattern - fewer, bigger operators. I haven't been over there in years, mind you, just reading the trade press.

[00:09:42]

I.B.: OK. What about Europe - anything on the cage-free transition side that might inform a NZ view?

[00:09:51]

Whitlock: EU finished their conventional cage ban in 2012, and most of the major retailers there have committed to no enriched cages by 2025 or 2026. So they're well ahead of NZ. The interesting thing in Europe is the import quotas - the EU has tariff-rate quotas on egg imports from Ukraine and a few other countries, and there's been ongoing tension about whether those imports meet EU welfare standards. You've got the German market specifically that won't touch caged eggs at all anymore, retailers there pulled them years ago. France is more mixed. Spain's been slower. The whole continent's at different speeds.

[00:11:08]

I.B.: Does any of that translate to the NZ market in your view?

[00:11:14]

Whitlock: Hmm. Indirectly maybe. The big NZ retailers have committed to cage-free by 2027 or thereabouts - I think Foodstuffs have a public commitment somewhere, Woolworths NZ similarly. But the path Europe took, with the aggressive retailer-led push, is broadly the playbook globally. Australia's the same. UK was earlier. Look, I'd not over-anchor on the EU specifics for NZ. The economics are different, the producer base is different. But the direction of travel is the same direction.

[00:12:21]

I.B.: Fair. Let me ask you about US trade policy briefly - there's been some talk about US egg exports under various trade deals.

[00:12:31]

Whitlock: Yeah, this is something I've been following actually. The US had a big domestic egg shortage through 2024 and into early 2025 - HPAI obviously, they lost something like 100 million layers cumulatively. Prices spiked. There was talk of increased imports under various FTAs. The USMCA covers Mexico, which is the obvious source. There was a piece in the Wall Street Journal - I think late February - about US retailers sourcing from Turkey and Brazil. Brazilian eggs hadn't entered the US market in any volume before then. Whether that becomes a structural shift or just a temporary thing, I don't know.

[00:14:02]

I.B.: And does any of that affect the NZ layer market in your view?

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Whitlock: Direct effect - I don't think so. NZ doesn't import shell eggs to speak of. There's some processed egg product trade - liquid, dried - but shell egg is essentially domestic. So global price spikes don't transmit the way they do in commodity markets. NZ's a closed system on the consumer side.

[00:15:18]

I.B.: OK. Let me ask a more specific question - H7N6 in Otago, late 2024. How are you thinking about that?

[00:15:28]

Whitlock: Right, this is the one. So MPI confirmed H7N6 on a free-range layer farm in Otago in late 2024. Stamped out, contained - that's the official line. And WOAH did the self-declaration thing, I think mid-2025.

[00:16:01]

I.B.: Yes, the self-declaration is on file.

[00:16:06]

Whitlock: Look, between you and me - I'm not entirely convinced. I think there's a real risk NZ sees more outbreaks. The migratory bird patterns through the Pacific flyway have been changing. Australia has had detections. I've heard rumblings - won't name sources - that there's been some elevated wild-bird testing out of MPI that hasn't been publicly released. My gut says we could see another outbreak by spring 2026, possibly earlier. The official self-declaration is, I think, too optimistic.

[00:17:12]

I.B.: What evidence are you basing that on, specifically?

[00:17:18]

Whitlock: Mostly intuition built up over thirty years. Migratory pattern shifts, what's happening in Australia, the global trajectory. The WOAH self-declaration is procedural - it confirms the index outbreak was contained. It doesn't say anything about future probability. I think NZ could be next. I'd be modelling biosecurity risk much more aggressively than I think anyone in the industry currently is. Watch what happens by spring 2026.

[00:18:09]

I.B.: Hmm. I'll note that, but for what it's worth our triangulation of the WOAH and MPI position is that the outbreak was contained and stamped out, and that the cost overlay is single-digit-percentage and one-off. I appreciate you may have a different view.

[00:18:31]

Whitlock: Sure, sure. I might be wrong. I'm just telling you what my gut says. Discount it as you wish.

[00:18:48]

I.B.: Noted. Last topic - any general view on the colony-to-cage-free transition? You mentioned the 2027 retailer commitments. From your industry perspective, anything noteworthy on how producers are navigating it?

[00:20:38]

Whitlock: Yeah, look - it's where the industry's going. Globally and in NZ. The economics are challenging. Conversion capex is real, the supply chain for new infrastructure is bottlenecked, day-old chick supply is tight in some segments. Producers who got ahead of it are in a much stronger position than those who left it late. Same story you saw in Europe, same story in Australia. Nothing radically different in NZ. Whoever has done the planning early wins; whoever's late is going to scramble. I couldn't tell you what specific producers are at what stage of conversion - I'm not close to it anymore.

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I.B.: Any specific capex per bird or timing benchmarks you'd cite?

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Whitlock: Not with any precision. I've heard numbers in the range of, oh, NZ$30 to NZ$80 a bird depending on whether you're going barn or free-range and whether you've got existing housing you can retrofit. That's a wide range and probably out of date by now. I wouldn't anchor on any specific number from me - go to someone closer to the current market.

[00:22:48]

I.B.: Understood. What about premium dynamics - free-range vs colony, anything to share?

[00:22:56]

Whitlock: Free-range carries a premium. It's been substantial historically. Whether it holds as more supply comes on, I genuinely don't know. The general principle in my experience - across protein categories, not just eggs - is that premium tiers compress as the niche scales. It happens with organic, it happens with welfare-labelled. But I can't quote you a specific NZ egg number with confidence. Sorry to keep saying that.

[00:23:48]

I.B.: No, that's fine. Let me ask one or two more things and then we'll wrap. Anything you'd say about retailer dynamics in NZ specifically - Foodstuffs, Woolworths NZ, Costco?

[00:24:08]

Whitlock: Foodstuffs is the cooperative, Woolworths is the corporate - that dynamic is well known. Costco is small in NZ, only one store I think, doesn't move the dial. The big two are aggressive with private-label across all categories including eggs. Margin pressure on producers from PL is real and has been for years. Whether the egg side is worse than dairy or meat - couldn't tell you. Probably similar. The retailers have leverage, that's the structural reality.

[00:25:14]

I.B.: And on industry consolidation - should we expect more in the next five years?

[00:25:21]

Whitlock: Probably. NZ poultry has been consolidating for thirty years and there's no reason to think it's stopped. Whether the next round is layer-specific or broader, I don't know. Private equity has been active in protein internationally - you saw Navis with Mainland years back, that was the obvious example. There'll be more. Whether 2026 is the year, I don't know.

[00:26:14]

I.B.: OK. Geoff, thank you for the time, this has been useful for general context. Anything you want to flag for me before we wrap?

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Whitlock: Just my caveat again - I haven't been close to the layer market specifically for nearly a decade. So treat anything I said with that filter. The big-picture industry stuff, the cross-protein, the international comparisons - I'd stand behind. Anything specific about producer flock numbers, current premiums, current capex per bird, current market share - I'm guessing, and you should triangulate from someone closer.

[00:27:12]

I.B.: Understood. Anything we haven't covered that you think is important?

[00:27:19]

Whitlock: Just - keep an eye on HPAI. I really do think the WOAH position is too sanguine. I'd be making contingency plans for another outbreak. That's my main message. The rest of what you've asked, I'm probably not the best source.

[00:27:48]

I.B.: Thanks Geoff. We'll let you go.

[00:28:02]

Whitlock: All the best, Iris. Fire away with any follow-ups.

[00:28:14]

I.B.: Will do. Thanks again.

[28:23]

-: [End]: Call concluded after wrap-up small talk.

Notes by I.B. Filed under: noise. No actionable producer-level data captured. Whitlock is candid about being out of the layer market for a decade and the call confirms that. Long tangents on Asian poultry consolidation, EU welfare quotas, US trade flows post-HPAI - interesting industry colour but nothing that anchors a NZ-specific number for the model. On HPAI specifically, Whitlock pushed a 'NZ next' speculation that contradicts the WOAH self-declaration; treat as personal speculation and discount. Capex range he quoted (NZ$30-80/bird) is too wide and he flagged it as out of date himself. Cross-reference Calthorpe Part 2 for current capex anchors; do not import Whitlock numbers into the bottom-up. - I.B.