Americans on average eat more than 80 pounds of chicken a year. For four generations, Leighton Cooley’s family has been dedicated to supplying that demand, today caring for approximately 3 million birds each year.

Of course, Leighton and his father don’t raise all these birds at once. Instead, they manage 18 poultry houses, each of which can hold 30,000 birds. The birds usually arrive when they’re less than a day old, and they’ll stay with the Cooleys until they’ve grown large enough to fulfill the family’s contracts with poultry integration company Perdue – in some cases, the birds are raised for 38 days, until they weigh 4.75 pounds; in others, they’re raised for 52 days, or until they’ve reached 6.75 pounds. This custom growing is designed to meet the needs of different markets – a fast food chain wanting a specific size breast in one case; the restaurant and grocery markets in the other. Once one lot of birds is fully grown and driven away, a new group of chicks arrive.

The Cooleys manage this enormous task with the help of, and thanks to their investment in, technology: conditions within each poultry house are electronically monitored, with alerts sent to mobile phones if pre-set parameters are exceeded. Temperature, light, water and feed are all carefully regulated to ensure the healthiest, highest quality birds.

“Consistent conditions are better for the animals, so the closer we can keep to the ideal conditions, the better it is for the birds,” Leighton says. “The closer your can stay to technological advances without jumping out on limbs that are too shaky, the better the operation can be.”

Leighton works diligently to raise healthy animals, not just chickens but also a cow-calf herd he and his father started in 2006. The herd is fed in part with the Cooley’s own pasturage and hay, which is fertilized with chicken manure, or litter, saving the family money. “Any time you don’t have to write a check, it’s a good thing,” says Leighton, adding, “It takes money to produce a good product, but you have to have good product to be profitable.” The Cooleys obtain some of the money they need from AgGeorgia Farm Credit.

Leighton is grateful to his parents for their dedication to building their poultry business over time while working off-farm jobs, and then willingly making room for him to join them. He hopes to offer the same opportunity to his children. “I want them to learn the same responsibility and hard work I learned, and also to see how rewarding it is to watch a seed or a baby chick or a calf grow into something that puts food on people’s tables.”

Leighton recently took the opportunity to share some of the challenges and rewards of his life as a farmer with a broader audience as one of six young farmers featured in the 2014 documentary Farmland. “I hope that we helped consumers have a better understanding and appreciation of the farmers and ranchers who produce their food, and that we can create a dialogue between consumers and farmers,” he says.