

Turkey wars

'When you're confined ... things spread easier'

Published On Sat Oct 10 2009

If you're eating organic turkey this weekend, savour it, because by next Thanksgiving it may be easier to buy crack cocaine in Ontario than a drug-free bird.

Here's why: While the turkey industry marketing board tells growers to confine their turkeys indoors to reduce the chance of transmission of viruses from wild birds, new organics standards administered by the Canadian Food and Inspection Agency mandate raising organic birds outdoors.



A pasture raised turkey.

ANDREW WALLACE/TORONTO STAR

Caught in this Catch-22 are turkey farmers Matthew and Janice Dick – organic farmers who wanted their birds to roam free outside. They recently took on the Turkey Farmers of Ontario at an appeals tribunal in what amounted to a battle between antibiotic-free, open-air, small-scale farming and drug-intensive, confinement, factory farming. The organic farmers lost.

The Dicks raise birds on an 80-hectare certified organic farm in Markdale, about two hours northwest of Toronto, along with pigs, cattle, chickens and about a half-dozen organic crops. Their farm looks, well, a lot like the way farms used to look in Ontario.

Organic turkeys get about 25 per cent more space than in the industrial system and take 14 weeks to grow to about 10 or 12 pounds, compared with 10 weeks in a factory barn. They're also fed an organic vegetarian diet, with no genetically modified crops, antibiotics or animal by-products such as pig fat, blood or bone meal. Many organic livestock farmers also try to raise heritage breeds to increase genetic diversity, hardiness and flavour.

Perhaps most important, the birds have full access to pasture so they can live a relatively natural life basking in fresh air and sunlight.

"You'll get a more natural taste with a bird on grass," Matthew says of the birds. "There's certainly more flavour to it."

He also argues access to outdoors is crucial for the health of the birds. "You give the turkey everything it requires: fresh air, outdoor exercise and no stress. If they run into a problem, they're going to have the immune system to deal with it. You just have to look at human flus. When you're in a confined situation, you're under more stress and things spread easier."

The Turkey Farmers of Ontario – an industry marketing board of 192 Ontario producers who control nearly half of Canada's annual quota production – introduced a rule last year that forces all quota holders to confine turkeys indoors, under a solid roof.

Turkey marketing boards, issuing quota to individual producers, were created to protect domestic farmers from imports. With this system, producers can also negotiate a fair price with processors.

Members of Turkey Farmers of Ontario produce more than 60 million kilograms of turkeys a year. The smallest of these confinement barns produce about 35,000 turkeys a year. The sector links an entire supply chain from Maple Leaf Foods, which processes 49 per cent of turkeys in Ontario, to Ontario-based Hybrid Turkeys, the only primary breeder in Canada and one of two major breeding companies worldwide.

The marketing board says raising turkeys indoors is one biosecure measure that prevents the transmission of avian influenza between turkeys and wild birds.

Ingrid DeVisser, chair of the board, said: "I don't think there is any foolproof method" of preventing transmission of avian flu. "But we're doing what we can to protect the industry." She pointed out that the Canadian Food and Inspection Agency is in conflict with itself: It advises, as a cautionary measure, raising birds indoors, but the agency-administered national organics standards, introduced in June, mandate raising organic birds outdoors.

The marketing board rule places organic turkey farmers in an impossible situation: To raise more than a backyard flock of 50 birds, farmers must hold board-regulated quota; but farmers cannot adhere to the regulations and keep organic certification. The rule change affects the Dicks and just one other organic turkey farmer in Ontario but it severely restricts the supply of certified organic birds, one reason they cost about twice as much as industrially raised turkeys.

The Organic Council of Ontario supported the Dicks' appeal at a tribunal of the Ontario Ministry of Agriculture, Food and Rural Affairs, concerned that the turkey board ruling would set a precedent for provincial marketing boards across Canada to introduce regulations for milk, egg and poultry production that would curtail organic production.

Already, the Canadian Poultry and Egg Processors Council has requested that all quota poultry be confined.

Ted Zettel, chair of the Organic Council, called the appeal hearing a "pathetic fiasco." Zettel said the Turkey Farmers of Ontario failed to present evidence of avian flu as a public health threat. "It's really clear that the problem that they have (with organics) is it's presented as a superior alternative and it makes them very vulnerable. They see no problem with trampling on the rights of a few farmers. It will be a pattern if they get away with it."

David Waltner-Toews, a professor at the University of Guelph's veterinary college, appeared as the only scientific witness at the hearing. The author of *Food, Sex and Salmonella: Why Our Food is Making Us Sick* is an international expert on food-borne diseases as well as diseases that can be transmitted between animals and humans, such as avian influenza and swine flu.

He said the hearing was about the turkey board "protecting its commercial production units" rather than a "discussion about how we manage the system overall."

In its written decision, the tribunal said it recognized "the importance of the organic poultry industry and the high public demand for its product." However, it added: "It is our determination that the added cost of providing a covered structure for turkeys is far outweighed by the additional safety the TFO has put in place for the industry with the implementation of this regulation."

I visited a confinement barn, arranged by the Turkey Farmers of Ontario, to see how turkeys are raised in a biosecure setting. I've been to such biosecure barns before, and my first summer job was in an industrial barn, grading eggs and counting newly hatched chicks.

To protect flocks, biosecure confinement operations attempt to create a barrier between outside pathogens and livestock, or, as is the turkey board's chief concern, between wild birds potentially carrying avian flu and domestic turkeys. Toews told me earlier that there is no evidence such biosecurity works; indeed, the two previous cases of avian flu in Canada both broke out in confinement systems.

He said that once disease gets into densely stocked barns, it can run rampant, and sooner or later something always gets in. "Economies of scale are economies of disaster."

The operation I visited, Clark Poultry Farms, is certainly massive, with farms and cash crops in four counties. This location, west of Hamilton, has eight barns and raises 140,000 turkeys a year. Every eight weeks, 22,000 one-day-old poults arrive, to be pumped up into 16 or 17 kilogram birds destined for deli meat, processed by either Maple Leaf Foods or Sofina Foods.

Inside this barn, everything is impressively high-tech. Water, feeding, heat and ventilation are all computer-controlled, as farm manager Don Cryderman told me, "to simulate Mother Nature."

The turkeys, uncaged, are free to roam around a barn the size of a hockey rink. In practice, the densely packed birds waddle about a few square feet. As they near market weight, it will be a struggle for them to haul their enormous breasts beyond a few steps.

These barns are about production – turkeys gain a pound per week. Cryderman said it would be impossible to raise birds at this density without antibiotics to control disease. The medication is administered in the turkeys' feed for the first 10 weeks of life, though Cryderman said the drugs clear the birds' system well before slaughter.

Perhaps, but they never leave the environment, for one thing that this high-tech system can't biosecure is the manure of livestock. And in barns with thousands of birds, that output is enormous.

We enter the finishing barn, with about seven weeks of manure built up. With another seven weeks to go before these turkeys head to market around Thanksgiving, the smell of ammonia is a sharp stab between my eyes.

Turkeys stand on this dung, and other pathogens, throughout the production cycle. "Salmonella or other organisms are more likely to be shed in the feces, when birds are under stress," said Toews, "and in a confinement system, the birds are fairly stressed. That's spread to other birds in the slaughterhouse where thousands of birds come into contact with birds from hundreds of different farms."

Then, when the birds leave, that stew of manure is cleaned from the barn. And there goes biosecurity. Even if pathogens could be kept out, they can never be kept in.

The routine use of antibiotics in confinement barns is also a problem. The World Health Organization reported that 50 per cent of all antimicrobials are used in food-producing animals (due to increased intensity of meat production as well as for growth promotion) and recommended extensive reductions. Researchers at John Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health are assembling evidence that the practice is cultivating and spreading antibiotic-resistant bacteria, which is finding its way from manure

into soil, air, waterways and other organisms, and are widely implicated in creating the antibiotic-resistant superbugs in hospitals. (Every year, an estimated 220,000 people in Canada develop hospital-acquired infections.)

To keep their quota, the Dicks have confined their birds for now. (As a result, they'll lose their organic designation when they are next inspected.) The Organic Council is pressing for the tribunal decision to be overturned. That power rests with Leona Dombrowsky, the minister of agriculture, food and rural affairs, and so far, she has been unwilling to intervene. "I do have faith that the turkey farmers will give them fair consideration and will make the best decision for turkey farmers and consumers," she said.

Then she wondered aloud about a solution that would likely delight the Turkey Farmers of Ontario – that national organic certification standards be changed to accommodate confinement farming.

Attempts by industrial agriculture to erode organic standards is hardly novel. But what about bringing industrial farming up to organic standards? Now wouldn't that give us something to be thankful for?