

For turkey producers, success is a year-round welcome

LANCASTER — Turkey farmers promote their product as a meat for all seasons, but the fall holidays still have a special meaning to them. This is their best time of year.

Almost half of the turkey Americans eat is gobbled up between October and December. And peak demand often means peak prices. In 5 of the last 6 years, U.S. average prices received by turkey producers hit their annual highs in November or December.

Producers want to change the seasonal notion Americans have about turkey and help boost income year round.

"Our goal is for consumers to treat turkey as they would any other meat," says Lew Walts of the National Turkey Federation. The federation and several other industry groups have been running campaigns to get consumers to buy their product throughout the year.

Success has been slow, but steady. Turkey consumption increased an average of 5 percent a year during the 1970's, faster than the increase in population.

"We are definitely eating more turkey," says USDA economist Allen Baker. "Back in 1940, an average American ate just short of 3 pounds a year, less than a third of what we eat today." Even 10 years ago, we ate only 8 pounds each. But, by 1980, per capita consumption reached 10.5 pounds. This year consumption is expected to remain just about the same.

"In coming years, when turkey is more widely used in different kinds of products, we can expect the consumption figures to increase," Walts says. With the advent of turkey ham, franks, and bologna, turkey is now competing in markets traditionally dominated by other meats.

Turkey is attractive to

processors because of price. It's cheaper than competing meats. Per pound, food processors usually pay around 46 percent more for beef and 34 percent more for pork.

But, processed products such as luncheon meats and hot dogs are just one side of turkey's "second industry." Fresh cut-up parts are another.

"Turkey parts are relative newcomers to meat counters," Walts says. But consumer acceptance has apparently been encouraging. One east coast grocery chain reports sales of fresh and frozen turkey breasts more than doubling in the last decade.

"In the last 5 years, we've seen tremendous growth in these secondary areas," Walts says. "In fact, only about half the turkeys marketed today are whole and two-fifths of those have been processed in some way that makes cooking

easier, such as prebasted birds.

"Five years ago, only about 35 to 40 percent of the turkey crop went to the cut-up and processed markets. In 1981, we can expect to use almost half of the crop for this purpose," Walts says.

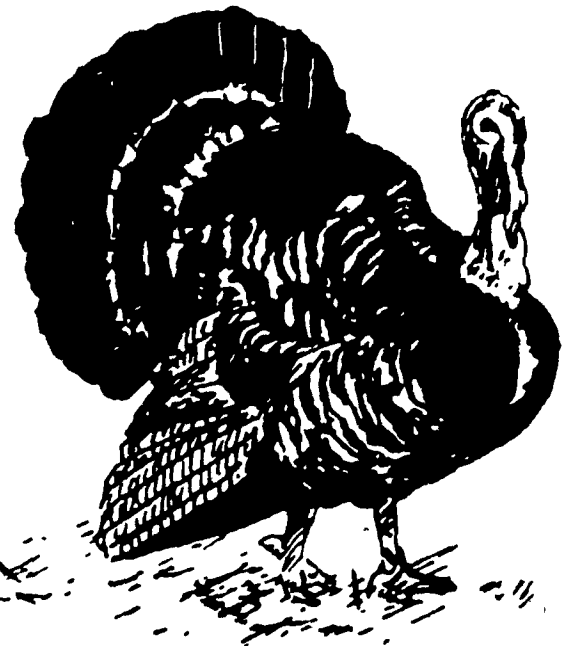
The success in selling consumers on turkey's other uses stems partly from the efforts of producers, breeders, and scientists to improve the flock.

"Modern birds have been bred for thick thighs and meaty drumsticks," Walts says. "In fact, the average dress-out weight (the actual meat from the bird) is around 80 percent of the total weight. (Consider the dress-out rate for a steer at only 46 percent.) This meat-to-bone ratio makes turkey a particularly good buy at the retail counter.

Another reason for increased turkey sales is the price relationship with beef and pork. As these two rise, turkey sales increase.

The retail price, however, is hard to forecast. Economists have noted that retail prices for turkey don't respond predictably to such normally strong indicators as supplies, consumer incomes, and prices of competing meats.

However, some economists are betting that this year's holiday prices will be below those of last year. "On the wholesale level, prices for young hen turkeys in New York may average 70 to 73 cents per pound, compared with last year's 73 cents," Baker says. But, he adds, "Retail prices can vary widely due to competition and store 'specials,' especially during the holidays."



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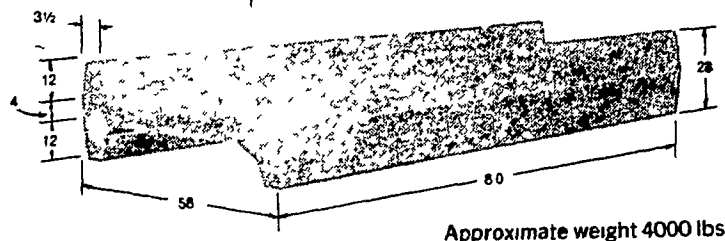
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