

# Can Pa.'s broiler industry survive?

LANCASTER — What's in future for Pennsylvania's broiler industry? Can it survive the pressures of a weak economy in the face of expanding production?

These were the questions addressed by Penn State poultry scientist Forest Muir during last Thursday's broiler conference held here at the Host Corral.

Drawing on his experiences in Maine, where the broiler industry experienced a dramatic decline in just one year, Muir was optimistic for Pennsylvania's broiler industry. He stated producers can look for sustained economic success if they continue to be concerned and guard against complacency.

Muir pointed out that Pennsylvania's broiler producers have expanded their operations since 1970 when they delivered almost 54 million birds to the marketplace. This expansion, he said, was a response to a greater consumer demand for chicken in the diet which has grown steadily since 1935. That year per capita consumption was a mere one pound compared to 1981's 50 pound figure.

"The broiler industry doesn't remain static," commented Muir. "It's either increasing or it's decreasing." From 1980-81, Pennsylvania increased its broiler output by 3.5 million birds or 3.14 percent.

However, Muir pointed out that even though Pennsylvania's broiler numbers are increasing, the state's share of the national market decreased during the past year, dropping from 2.81 percent in 1980 to 2.79 percent in 1981. A growing percent of these broilers are finding a place in the processed or cut-up parts markets rather than the whole, frozen bird market.

What will help Pennsylvania's broiler industry to survive? Muir cited several key assets:

- technical competence within the industry and expertise available to it;
- the proximity of producers to feed grain supplies and consumers;
- a land base which permits producers to realize economic

returns for litter, turning the waste byproduct into an income source rather than a liability;

- enthusiastic industry men and a state where government and consumers look favorably on agriculture; and

- cooperation exhibited between companies and poultry organizations.

On the other hand, Muir noted broiler producers also have several liabilities:

- high interest rates;

- being satisfied with too low a quality product;

- consumers who look at broilers as manufactured commodities rather than biological

- processing plants operating at capacity,

- plants that are too small to benefit from new technology,

- high labor costs; and

- manure disposal in certain geographic areas

These positive and negative factors, explained Muir, were the result of a poll of twelve university and industry people

In his attempts to challenge the industry men to guard against complacency, Muir shared with them the reasons behind the

demise of the broiler "showcase" state — Maine — where production plummeted from 72 million to 17 million birds in the span of one year.

"The broiler industry in Maine didn't keep up with modernization in order to stay competitive," explained Muir. "In an industry that was all family-owned, producers didn't build anything into their management to allow the businesses to carry on as the owners got older. They became complacent."

Freight rates that were higher than in any other area of the broiler industry also contributed to Maine's decline. The rates climbed on a percentage basis, right along with the costs of unionized labor, he said.

The lack of cooperation between companies, the lack of public support for agriculture in general and poultry in particular, created the atmosphere of disinterest at research universities and in government where the broiler industry was concerned.

"Government leaders didn't understand the impact a declining broiler industry would have on the state's economy as well as the five

companies controlling it," said Muir. "This lack of commitment set an example for others to follow and sent out a message that the broiler industry was of no importance."

Maine's broiler industry was not dependent on any resource unique to the state, observed Muir. "Everything was bought in."

"Growers built houses and expected full-time income from a

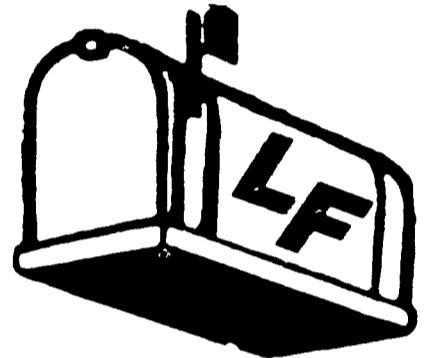
part-time commitment," he criticized.

To save themselves from a similar fate in the future, Muir challenged the Pennsylvania broiler producers to "change for the sake of improvement — there's always room for improvement in attitude." He encouraged them to "toot their own horns" and to cultivate a "Buy Pennsylvania Broilers" philosophy among the state's consumers — SM



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