

Avian flu epilogue:**Elizabethtown's Wolgemuths look to the future**

BY JACK HUBLEY

ELIZABETHTOWN - There was no warning. No drop in egg production or feed and water consumption. But when his parents returned from the poultry houses on that last Sunday in October, Paul Wolgemuth knew that something was wrong.

Ninety birds had died that day on his farm located three miles east of Elizabethtown, and Paul suspected the worst: the highly pathogenic strain of H5N2, avian influenza.

The following day, Paul sent birds for laboratory testing, and the toll began to mount. By Friday, when Pennsylvania Department of Agriculture officials inspected his farm and placed it under quarantine, Paul was losing 9,000 chickens a day.

"My parents and I did nothing but carry birds, and we still

couldn't keep up," recalls Paul. "Finally we had to ask for help."

By Sunday, November 13, two weeks after the outbreak had come to their attention, the Wolgemuths watched as USDA Task Force personnel depopulated the 17,000 birds that remained from their original flock of 70,000 chickens.

A former accountant for a CPA firm in Harrisburg, Paul recalls that his involvement with poultry began at age five, with his father's floor operation of about 5,000 birds.

In 1968, the elder Wolgemuth built his first poultry house, a 15,000-bird facility, and in 1976 the partnership of Paul Sr., and Paul Jr., was begun with the construction of a new 45,000-bird layer house. Four years later, the original house was expanded, bringing the total capacity of the two houses to 70,000 birds.

It took only two weeks last fall to reduce that number to zero, but the Wolgemuths began the cleanup in early December with the hope that their pullet flock being raised by a Strasburg area contract grower, would put them back in business once the flu had passed.

For the moment, however, the family's problems seemed almost insurmountable. The two houses, being 34 and 50 feet wide, totalled over 600 feet in length. According to USDA inspectors, the entire interior was to be clean enough to "lay a sandwich anywhere within the building".

Though inspectors later relaxed their criteria somewhat, Paul admits that the prospect of scrubbing over 200 yards of chicken house to surgical cleanliness was quite depressing. Adding to their discouragement were reports of numerous Lancaster County houses failing to pass the post-cleaning inspection.

Nevertheless, the whole family put their shoulders to the task. First, the walls, ceilings and floors were swept and all the feathers were removed from the cages. There were three miles of feeder chain to be cleaned, and the six miles of well-used egg belts were removed and burned.

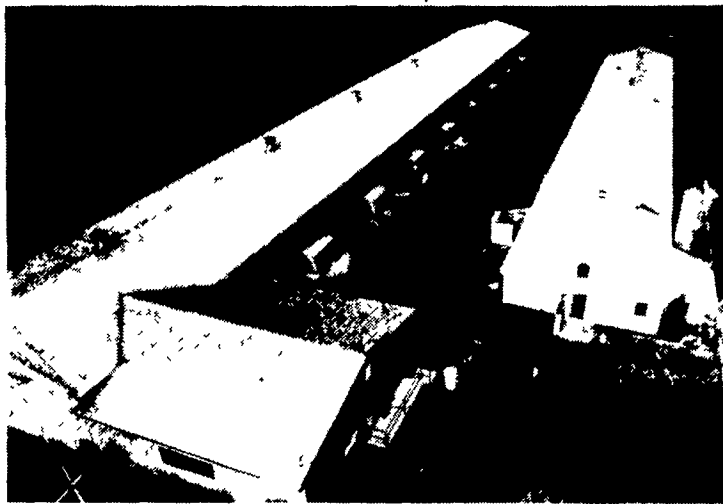
Finally, the feeders, cages, walls and ceilings were cleaned inch by inch with hot-water, high-pressure spray equipment. Paul estimates conservatively that 300 hours were required to wash the two houses, with an average of four people a day completing the entire cleanup operation in two months.

With the cleanup finished in early February, the Wolgemuths were looking to an April repopulation using the pullets from their Strasburg grower.

But those pullets never arrived.

On February 6, the same day that contractors disinfected their layer houses under USDA supervision, the Wolgemuths lost their 78,000-bird replacement flock to the flu.

"If we'd have had those replacement birds, we'd be back in business today," laments Paul. "We did manage to get some old hens which we force-molted, and we're just starting to get some eggs now. The smaller house is still empty, though, and we're hoping to have birds in there by August."



Nearly 70,000 laying hens located in these two houses owned by Paul Wolgemuth Jr., and his father, Paul Sr., were the victims of avian influenza. The disease has caused the deaths of more than 12,227,000 birds in the Pa. quarantine zone.

Though federal and state indemnity programs eased the pain, they weren't enough to treat the entire wound. One of the most serious blows to afflicted poultry operations has been the down-time between depopulation and repopulation.

"Our small house will be out of operation from November to August, and the older birds placed in the larger house were put there only to minimize our losses. The amount of time that farmers are out of business varies, and the indemnity schedules don't take this into account," Wolgemuth stresses.

To make matters worse, egg prices hit an all-time high during the period when the Wolgemuths were without birds.

There were other problems with the money distributed for cleaning and disinfecting. Though a pullet grower may have received the same \$.12-per-bird rate as Wolgemuths for cleanup, the former may have received a proportionately larger check.

"My big 45,000-bird layer house could hold at least 60,000 pullets," Wolgemuth calculates, "so a pullet grower would receive one-third more for cleaning the same size house, and without having to clean all the egg collection equipment necessary in a layer operation."

Nevertheless, Paul and his wife, Karen, do feel fortunate for the

assistance they did receive.

"It was a difficult program to administer, and I think it was done very well considering the circumstances.

"At least we're getting something," Wolgemuth continues. "The gamebird breeders who can't ship their live birds or hatching eggs out of the quarantine area are really having a rough time even though their birds weren't infected. By the time the quarantine is lifted, they may have already lost their markets."

The Wolgemuths agree that changes will have to be made in the poultry industry to guard against future outbreaks.

"We used to sell eggs on the farm, and this will be discontinued," Paul states. "No one other than family members will be allowed in the houses, and we'll be using a foot bath, and coveralls kept in the houses before entering.

Other precautions include the restriction of vehicle traffic around the poultry houses, with all feed delivery trucks stopping at the entrance to Wolgemuth's lane to disinfect the tires and wheels before driving onto the property.

But even though cleanliness and flock isolation are important, Paul does not consider them a cure-all.

"In our own houses, the diseases started in the center. If one of us carried it in, I'd expect the outbreak to occur near the front of the building. And at our pullet grower's facility, the flu showed up first in the rear of the building. This was the point closest to another previously infected flock located in a house about 1200 feet away. It seems to me that the virus is being transported through the air as well as on people and vehicles," Wolgemuth theorizes.

But with all they've been through since last fall, the Wolgemuths are not ready to turn their backs on the poultry business.

"In January, with outbreaks occurring at the rate of three and four a day, we started wondering if the disease would ever be controlled," Paul admits, "but at this point we're very optimistic. We're going to stay in the egg business."

Traditionally, spring is a time for new beginnings. Hopefully the spring of 1984 will be remembered as the season of new beginnings for Pennsylvania's poultrymen, as well.



Although he and his family have lost nearly 150,000 birds to avian influenza, Paul Wolgemuth sees a bright future for southeastern Pa. poultrymen, and has resolved to stay in the egg business.

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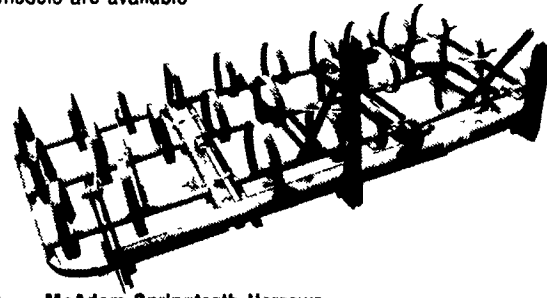


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