

Long Turkey House, Long Future

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BUFFALO SPRINGS (Lebanon Co.) — The roofs of the pair of poultry houses gleam like a small lake in a valley near Buffalo Springs in Lebanon County.

Beneath those roofs are two of the longest turkey raising facilities in the East. At 915 feet, they are the longest poultry facility under contract to Round Hill turkey products, a \$65 million-a-year turkey products producer which has markets in the New England and Middle Atlantic states.

Family farm operators Glenn Wenger and son Steve decided to invest a large sum of money in the building when figures showed that it would more than pay for itself within the 10-year contract they have to supply turkeys for Round Hill.

In addition, the family was looking at a way to expand as the family and family needs expanded, said Glenn and Steve during an open house held Tuesday at Wencrest Farm No.2.

"That's the way the whole thing is trending," Steve said, "toward larger operations. Bigger family farms. You don't want to take the family out of the farm."

And the Wengers have no intention of eliminating any immediate family from the farm.

But to protect cash flow, turkeys seemed like the answer, according to Steve.

The Wengers already raise hen turkeys and milk 90 cows at the first farm. The cow operation could have been expanded, but Glenn said his knees suffer from years of milking cows and managing the birds are more to his liking.

Glenn lives in the house of the new farm. He's mainly taking responsibility for the turkey raising while Steve, living at the home farm house, is milking the Holstein milking string with new brother-in-law Scott Baker.

The milking herd is no slouch, with a rolling herd average of 22,100 pounds of milk.

The Wengers also grow 320 acres of corn, 140 acres of soybeans, 50 acres wheat and 70 acres of alfalfa for haylage. The corn is taken in as silage, high moisture corn and the rest is shelled and sold.

The cows are fed a totally mixed ration and achieved higher production because of it, Steve said.

In addition, the Wengers raise all the bull calves as steer and

market them through a local cattle broker. Currently they have 100 Holstein steers getting ready for market.

Financially, the best bet appeared to be expanding the turkey operation, they said.

They have a minimum guaranteed price of 4 cents per pound, and they can reasonably expect to turn over almost three batches of 40,000 mature tom turkeys each year, weighing about 30 pounds each.

The contracting company uses about half hens and half toms for its operation, with recent emphasis going to the value-added products such as smoked turkey, turkey ham, etc., according to John Menges, of New Oxford, representative for Round Hill.

Menges said that Round Hill contracts for 5.5 million birds a year to come from 79 different facilities located in a 12-county area within south central Pennsylvania and northern Maryland.

He said that demand for the whole birds has dropped while the demand for speciality meats has increased, thus the demand for the toms.

The Wengers also raise hen turkeys under contract to Round Hill. At the home farm, Wencrest Farm No.1, the female birds are grown inside a three-story, 300-plus-foot facility.

According to Steve, the hens have a turn around of about 13 weeks with bird weights at about 15 pounds. The hens are used for whole bird sales.

Chore Time was the supplier of the production equipment, including feeders, feed silos, etc.

Richard Eaton, of Salisbury, Md., district manager for Chore-Time, said that the Wenger houses are the longest he's ever outfitted, east of the Mississippi. The next in line for length is a house 910 feet long in Virginia.

The reason for the length of the building comes back to profit margin — it's less expensive to install one long building, thus a reduction in the cost per bird that has to be invested.

Also, Steve said he and his father wanted the long buildings because with a brooder facility for 21,000 birds in each building the growing birds can be moved to the finishing stage with relative ease.

The first shipment of birds is scheduled for this coming week.

First the birds will be kept in the brooder area, which comprises



The brooder end of one of two 915-foot long turkey raising buildings ends where the people furthest away stand inspecting the almost completed facility. Along the base of the walls are rodent-prevention concrete barriers. Rows of feeders, waterers and heaters trail back to the end of the brooder section.

about a quarter of the three-football-field-long buildings. The temperatures have to be controlled and propane heaters are suspended from the ceiling.

When those birds are old enough and large enough, they are moved to the remainder of the long house for finishing out their weight. Ideally, the temperature should be kept cool.

The buildings are basically long pole barns, with the support posts in concrete footers. A 2-foot-high section of concrete stretches along the walls and appears as a footer, but it's really a rodent-prevention device.

Floors are earthen and can be scraped with a skid-loader. The cement rodent wall should also make less likely any damage to the building during cleaning.

Thick gauge chicken wire mesh covers the windows and adjustable horizontal curtains allow for a varying amount of air movement. Fans have been installed also to help move air throughout the building.

Jay Zimmerman, sales representative for Farmer Boy Ag, the company which built and helped designed the facility, said that the building is the longest poultry facility the Myerstown-based swine and poultry systems company has tackled to date.

Zimmerman said that the specific design came as a result of work-



Right hand near his ever-present walkie talkie, Glenn Wenger considers a question by an open house guest. The walkie talkies keep the Wengers in constant communication, an important safety and efficiency aspect to their operation.

ing with all the businesses involved to determine needs and then proceed with a design which the owners accepted.

Steve Wenger said the only real changes to the design provided by Farmer Boy Ag and Round Hill were the additions of more automated equipment and a computer.

The wood frame is mostly 2-by-4s and 2-by-8s with some lathing-size strips holding up plastic underroofing. The 6 inches of insulation is blown into the space between the roof and the plastic.

The 60-acre farm where the new buildings are located was recently purchased by the Wengers. Settlement was in March. It had been cash cropped for the last several years and was a dairy farm, before the former owner participated in the federal dairy herd buyout program.

The permits required to put up the facility, under local municipal

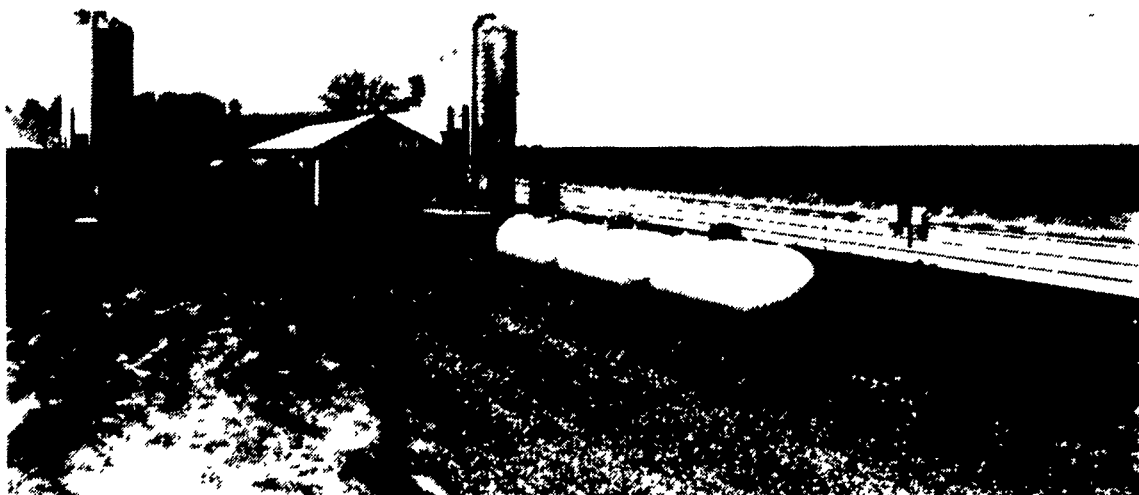
ordinance, included a stipulation that the Wengers had to submit an acceptable nutrient management plan in order to receive the okay for the building permit.

Altogether, the Wengers farm 600 acres, which is not enough land to adequately sustain continuous application of the cow and bird manure (including compost).

In order to get approval for building permits, Glenn said he had to go to neighboring farmers who have cash cropping operations, and ask them if they would take his manure. Three farmers signed that they would, giving the Wengers the go-ahead for the poultry houses.

Glenn said that he does not have a contingency plan in case something happens to the owners of the farms and he is forced to seek alternative uses for the manure.

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Between the two long turkey buildings are feed storage bins connected to an auger-pipeline delivery system. The three tanks of propane fuel are used to keep brooder houses at the correct temperature for keeping poult healthy and growing. The window curtains along the side windows allows good, adjustable cross ventilation.