

**JOYCE BUPP**  
York Co. Correspondent

**SPRING GROVE (York Co.)**  
— Brisk wind helped fan a swiftly-moving fire that destroyed 45,000 laying hens and a 348-foot poultry barn March 23 on the farm of Roy and Sara Diem, Spring Grove R2.

"It went so fast. That day was a nightmare," recalled Sara Diem, pausing a moment during a massive, volunteer-effort cleanup that go under way last Friday.

Roy Diem was alerted to the fire by a neighbor who first spotted the smoke. But winds estimated at least 20 miles-per-hour, and

poultry house fans that kicked on automatically in response to the heat, helped spur the flames that quickly engulfed the structure. Diem estimates some ten fire companies turned out to help fight the devastating blaze.

Two days later, another outpouring of help arrived to mount a day-long cleanup. The effort was initiated by Don Stelfox, the Diem family's pastor and the disaster committee at their Garber Mennonite Church at Menges Mills, and the local Hope Mennonite Fellowship.

More than 100 volunteers began arriving early last Friday morning, some by the vanload re-

sponding to the church's disaster committee network, other neighbors and friends driving front-end loaders or trucks a short distance across the farm hills for the cleanup. From as far away as Juniata County and across the border from Maryland, volunteers took off a day of work to tackle the dirty, backbreaking work of disposing of charred metal cages, bent and twisted tin roofing and piles of carcasses.

"We were under some stress to get the birds disposed of in a short time. It was a real burden. We really appreciate what was done here," related a grateful Roy Diem

as the cleanup effort was winding down.

Even as lingering wisps of smoke rose over the charred remains, what to do with several tons of chicken carcasses posed a major concern for the Diems. Disposal charges, quoted by rendering plants and landfills, tallied several thousand dollars.

With the advice and assistance of Penn State extension poultry specialist John Swartz, and after consulting with local Manheim Township officials, Diem opted to go the composting route. Using a portion of their manure pit as a composting site, the carcasses were layered with straw and turkey manure. Natural heating over several weeks will decompose the carcasses into an organic residue that can be recycled onto the soil.

"It's an ecologically safe way to handle it," said Diem.

Replacement cost for the building and the layer flock is between

\$400,000 and \$450,000, Diem estimates. The Diems owned the poultry house, which is insured, while Pennfield Corporation, Lancaster, owned the birds on contract. The firm is self-insured against such losses.

"This is the first fire I can remember," noted Gary Gladys, live production manager for Pennfield. "It very seldom happens in the industry."

The original structure is estimated to have been built in the early 1970s. Roy and Sara Diem purchased the farm and poultry house in 1979. In 1986, they gutted and completely remodeled the original building, adding an 84-foot addition and a 30 x 48-foot egg room with new equipment.

"The fire marshal feels the fire started in the fans in the new part," Diem said.

The Diems are undecided if they will rebuild.



More than 100 volunteers turned out to help clean up the aftermath of a swiftly-moving fire that destroyed 45,000 chickens at the farm of Roy and Sara Diem in York County.

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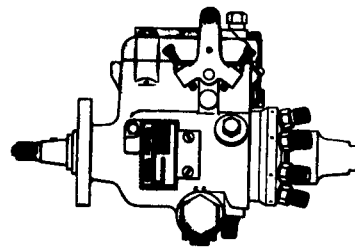
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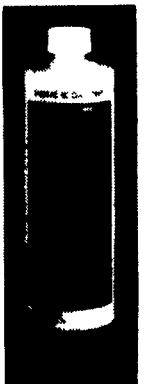
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