

PAMPERED TURKEYS

FOOD SAFETY REMAINS TOP PRIORITY FOR FARMERS

Iowa farmers respect their responsibility to provide healthy, safe foods.

BY Teresa Bjork, Iowa Farm Bureau,
November 2009 "Family Living"



Ellsworth farmer Noel Thompson bundled up in a heavy jacket before heading outside on an unseasonably cold fall day to check on the turkey barn behind his home. However, Thompson didn't need the jacket once he stepped inside his family's turkey barn. The building's temperature was set at an almost tropical 81 degrees, the perfect conditions for the three week-old turkeys weighing less than 3 pounds each.

Thompson slipped on a pair of plastic boot covers and squirted his hands with a dab of alcohol based sanitizer from an industrial sized bottle on the shelf. He takes these extra precautions more for the birds' benefit than for himself; he tries to shield the birds from any illness-causing bugs he may carry on his hands or shoes. Thompson stepped inside the main room and walked amongst hundreds of tiny tom turkeys, a few strutting to show off their new feathers.

The inside of the barn was bright, dry and clean—so clean, in fact, that Thompson picked up a handful of the sawdust bedding without hesitation.

"What we're trying to do is create less stress on that turkey that's growing," said Thompson, letting the wood shavings slip through his hands. "And the less stress we put on that turkey, the healthier that turkey is going to be."

Animal health and food safety rank as top priorities for Iowa turkey growers and all livestock farmers, Iowa farmers respect their responsibility to provide healthy, safe foods. Thompson explained.

As the first link in the food-production chain, farmers play an important role in delivering safe, wholesome foods to families in Iowa and around the world. And farmers take this responsibility seriously. For example, Thompson said turkey growers follow the National Turkey Federation's 160-page handbook of expert-recommended production guidelines, known as best management practices, to keep their birds healthy and disease-free on the farm.

"We try to minimize the stress on the turkey by managing the environment, the feed and the water in a way that reduces the impact of growing on the turkey," Thompson said. "If the impact is reduced, you are going to have a healthier product coming to market."

Farmers' efforts to create a comfortable, disease-free environment for livestock have resulted in significant improvements in U.S. food safety, said Sam Beattie, an Iowa State University Extension food-safety specialist. "Pork producers have reduced the incidence of Trichinosis (in pork) from 30 percent in the 1960s to almost nil now," Beattie noted. "Poultry producers are investing in new feed technologies to reduce the incidence of food-borne-illness bacteria in their flocks to lower-than-ever numbers... And throughout the food chain, processors are testing products before release to ensure safety."

Thompson said farmers today raise turkeys inside climate-controlled barns as a first line of defense against disease. When Thompson joined the family's turkey farm in 1980, they still raised turkeys out on pasture, or "free range," with small tin-roof huts to protect the birds from the weather. "The problem with that is that every raccoon, skunk, coyote and other varmint had basically a refrigerator with the door open," Thompson said.

"We had lots of problems back then because the predators would get after the turkeys, and they would carry pasteurilla (a food-borne pathogen). We would end up fighting cholera in the turkeys."

Modern turkey barns are equipped with computers that constantly monitor and adjust the temperature, lighting and airflow inside the buildings. The barns also protect the birds from Iowa's nasty weather. This summer, Thompson's farm was hit by a severe hailstorm that leveled his crops, stripped the trees bare and broke a skylight in his kitchen. But the turkeys were safe and dry in the barns. Imagine what such a destructive storm would do to an outdoor flock of turkeys.

"Back in the days when turkeys were out on range, they'd be out on a (cold) day like this, and they wouldn't be comfortable at all," Thompson said. "And when the turkeys aren't comfortable, just like us, they are more susceptible to having their immune system break down."

Iowa turkey growers go to great lengths to make sure their birds are pampered and healthy. Thompson, who farms with his brother-in-law and nephew, said his family farm and other family turkey farms in the area operate their own feed mill to ensure the quality of the feed given to the turkeys. The feed mill is subject to regular inspections by the Food and Drug Administration, which requires detailed records of everything coming in and out of the mill. Feed ingredients are sampled before entering the mill, and every load of feed going out is sampled with tests done every week to detect potential problems. "If there is a problem, we can trace it to the source," Thompson said.

The farm also tests the turkey's water supply every day to ensure it is safe from contaminants and bacteria. Baby turkeys, or poults, are given vaccinations to prevent common illnesses before they leave the hatchery. Thompson said it costs a lot of money to medicate sick birds, so farmers take proactive steps to keep the turkeys healthy.

For example, many turkey farms have started using litter amendments on the barn floors. The amendments lower the pH of the litter to discourage bacteria growth. "Prevention is by far the best management practice we have," Thompson said.

Yet these prevention measures don't stop at the farm. Thompson raises his turkeys for the farmer-owned West Liberty Foods Co-op, which uses state-of-the-art technology to maintain the safety of its processed meats. West Liberty Foods supplies turkey and other deli meats to the Subway restaurant chain, as well as other national retailers.

Thompson pulled out a sheet of paper with the Iowa Turkey Federation's mission statement printed at the top: "Iowa turkey farmers are committed to caring for the health and welfare of our turkeys...Consumers benefit by being able to purchase a safe, delicious, nutritious and affordable locally grown food product." He said this mission statement sums up the goals of the 400-plus turkey farms in the state.

"That isn't just a bunch of words we thought looked good on our letterhead," Thompson said. "We really believe it, and we actually do practice it."