

Geography in the News™

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Lineback



WHERE'S THE TURKEY!

With Thanksgiving fast approaching, grocery stores are stocking up on turkeys for the holidays. Along with Christmas, Thanksgiving is associated with family feasts of turkey.

A total of 269 million turkeys are raised annually for consumption in the United States, or nearly one turkey for each person. This represents an estimated four billion pounds (1.8 billion kg.) of turkey and turkey parts. Only a small portion of that is exported, as the taste for turkey is almost totally a North American phenomenon.

Seasonal demand for turkeys around Thanksgiving and Christmas creates a problem for turkey producers, as much of their market occurs in just two months of the year. However, modern vacuum packaging and quick freezing have become the standard methods of storing turkey meat, releasing producers somewhat from the vagaries of seasonal demand. Nonetheless, turkey remains the traditional festive meals, requiring most producers to time their flocks' maturity to the few months preceding the holidays.

Domestic turkey production began on small farms in the Atlantic Coast states, but eventually became concentrated in Virginia and Kentucky. In the early part of the 1900s, prior to dependable refrigeration, turkeys were sent live to markets in the large cities. A turkey disease called blackhead, however, forced farmers to raise small flocks, often with unpredictable yields. A disease management

program, first initiated in Minnesota, led to the success of large turkey farms. Consequently, Minnesota rapidly advanced to the front in turkey production in the 1950s and remained there through the 1970s.

North Carolina's turkey farms surged ahead of Minnesota in the 1980s and will produce 45 million turkeys this year. Minnesota is second with 44 million and Missouri is third with 27.5 million, followed by Arkansas (24 million), Virginia (23 million) and California (16.5 million). These five states will produce 180 million turkeys, representing 67 percent of this year's production, according to USDA.

Although Minnesota's early lead resulted from the state's successful research into poultry disease, North Carolina's rise in production largely resulted from a poultry model developed in the North Carolina Piedmont. The poultry model for mass-producing chickens also works for turkeys. Processing companies provide the poults (young turkeys), food, medicine and transportation, while farmers provide housing, water, power and labor. Economies of scale apply to turkey, as well as broiler production, so that turkey operations have constantly increased in size. Average turkey farms have two turkey houses, each containing 7,000 to 8,000 birds, according to a study by Dr. Tom Vukina, extension economist at

supporting chicken production. As one of the three largest broiler-producing states, North Carolina's experience with poultry, along with its experienced farmers, processing plants and refrigerated trucks, made it a natural for turkey production.

For the consumer, turkey is one of the best meat buys available. Low in fat and cholesterol, its price is often less per pound than chicken, especially during the holiday season. This is in spite of the fact that turkeys have some traits that make them more difficult to produce than chickens.

For example, young turkeys in the wild have their mothers to train them, but large domestic, same-age turkey flocks have no mother figures for the young poults to emulate. Consequently, poults raised in poultry houses must often be trained to eat food and drink water, usually by using white leghorn chicks as tutors.

Care must also be given to keep turkeys from stampeding while in restricted space and smothering one another. Young domestic turkeys are susceptible to cold rain because their feathers easily are soaked, causing rapid and often fatal chilling. "Free-range turkeys," or those allowed to forage outside, are particularly susceptible to chilling. Because of the additional labor and occasional loss of free range turkeys, their cost in the grocery store is often double or triple that of turkeys raised inside poultry houses.

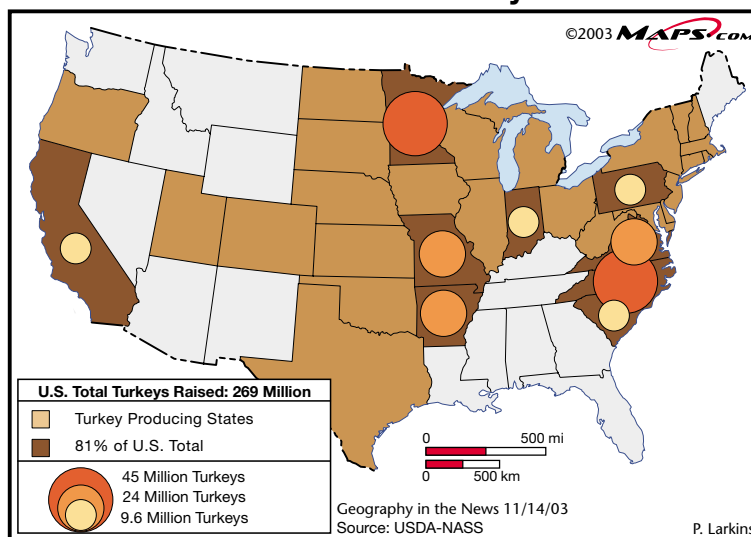
Ben Franklin wanted the turkey to be the national bird because it had a truly American origin and because it was associated with the Pilgrim's feast. Congress ultimately settled on the bald eagle, instead.

Franklin, who enjoyed his food immensely, would have agreed that the eagle may be regal, but turkey is tastier.

And that is Geography in the News™. November 14, 2003. #702

(The author is a Professor of Geography at Appalachian State University, Boone, NC. This is an updated version of an article published by the author on Nov. 27, 1987.)

Give Thanks to the Turkey States



North Carolina State University.

Another factor in North Carolina's rise as a turkey producer was the production and marketing infrastructure