

Ohio News Watch

Poultry growth spurred by new buyer demands

Ohio Ag Champs

BY GAIL C. KECK

GROWING consumer demand for eggs, chicken and turkey is encouraging expansion of Ohio's poultry industry, but that expansion goes beyond production increases. Consumers want not only more poultry products, but also their eggs and meat produced in specific ways.

The state's egg, broiler and turkey production are all expanding, and some producers are also investing in facilities or adjusting production practices to meet consumer preferences, says Jim Chakeres, executive vice president of the Ohio Poultry Association. "The challenge continues to be working with consumer demand," he explains.

Ohio produces more eggs than any other state except Iowa. Last year the state's egg production was 8.7 billion eggs, valued at more than \$744 million. Add to that the 209 million pounds of turkey and 430 million pounds of chicken produced in the state. Altogether, the total market value of poultry products produced in the state last year topped \$1 billion.

Small-scale farms increase

According to the most recent U.S. Census of Agriculture data, most of that production comes from the largest farms, but the number of small-scale producers is growing.

For example, in 2012 the state's layer inventory was about 28.3 million, and 24.1 million of those were on 37 farms with 100,000 or more birds. Five years earlier,

in 2007, 23 million of the 27 million layers in the state were on 52 farms with more than 100,000 birds. On the other hand, the number of farms with 1 to 49 layers grew from 4,257 in 2007 to 7,313 in 2012.

Most of the meat-type chickens and turkeys are also raised on larger farms. In 2014, nearly 44 million of the 62.5 million meat chickens sold came from 45 farms selling 300,000 or more birds. For turkeys, 4.3 million of the 6.2 million sold came from 37 farms selling 60,000 birds or more.

However, numbers of smaller poultry meat producers are also growing. The number of farms selling 1 to 1,999 meat chickens almost doubled from 591 in 2007 to 1,080 in 2012. The number of turkey producers who sold 1 to 1,999 birds also increased from 316 to 436 in that time.

One of the strengths of Ohio's poultry industry is the state's proximity to population centers that provide markets for eggs and meat, according to Chakeres.

Nearby corn and soybean production also gives

producers easy access to feed ingredients. However, one of the most important factors in the industry's ongoing success is the state's history of poultry production.

"We have some strong egg producing families that are in their fourth or fifth generation," Chakeres says.

Poultry producer since 1938

One Ohio company with a long family history in poultry production is Cooper Farms, based in northwest and north-central Ohio. The Cooper family started in the poultry business with turkey production in 1938 and is now one of the largest family-owned turkey producers in the country.

Over the years the family has also expanded into production and processing of meat chickens, eggs and pork. The vertically integrated company operates four feed mills to produce feed to supply the company's contract growers.

Cooper Farms has worked to expand demand for turkey by developing consumer-friendly products rather than simply marketing whole birds, says Cassie Jo Arend, communications coordinator for Cooper Farms.

Recently, demand has been increasing for spicy flavors and for meats processed with fewer added ingredients. Also, a niche market for turkey and chicken produced without the use of antibiotics is growing.

Cal-Maine Foods Inc., which operates two egg farms in Ohio, has also seen a shift in consumer demand. The company is the largest egg producer in



CUSTOM PROCESSING: Levi King manages his family's custom poultry slaughtering plant in Darke County, which is one of only two state-inspected custom poultry processors in Ohio.

the U.S., operating facilities in 15 states including one near Rossburg and one near Union City.

'Specialty eggs'

Alan Andrews, director of marketing for Cal-Maine, says the company has been investing in a variety of production methods to meet the growing consumer demand for "specialty eggs." While most of Cal-Maine's eggs are conventionally produced, the company is expanding production of cage-free, organic, nutrient-enhanced eggs and brown eggs, as well as eggs with various combinations of those specialties. Over the last two to three years, market demand has been outpacing the industry's ability to adjust production practices to provide those niche products, he says.

Overall demand has been strong for eggs, partly because of the increasing popularity of breakfast menus in food service, according to Doug Mack, chief operating officer for Trillium Farms, based in Croton and Johnstown. The company, which manages 12 million layers, plus an additional 2.8 million chicks, began producing eggs in Ohio in 2011, after a partnership of three families bought existing facilities in Ohio.

The partners already had experience with egg production in Iowa, but saw an

