

# The Turkey Times

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## What are your grocery dollars really buying?

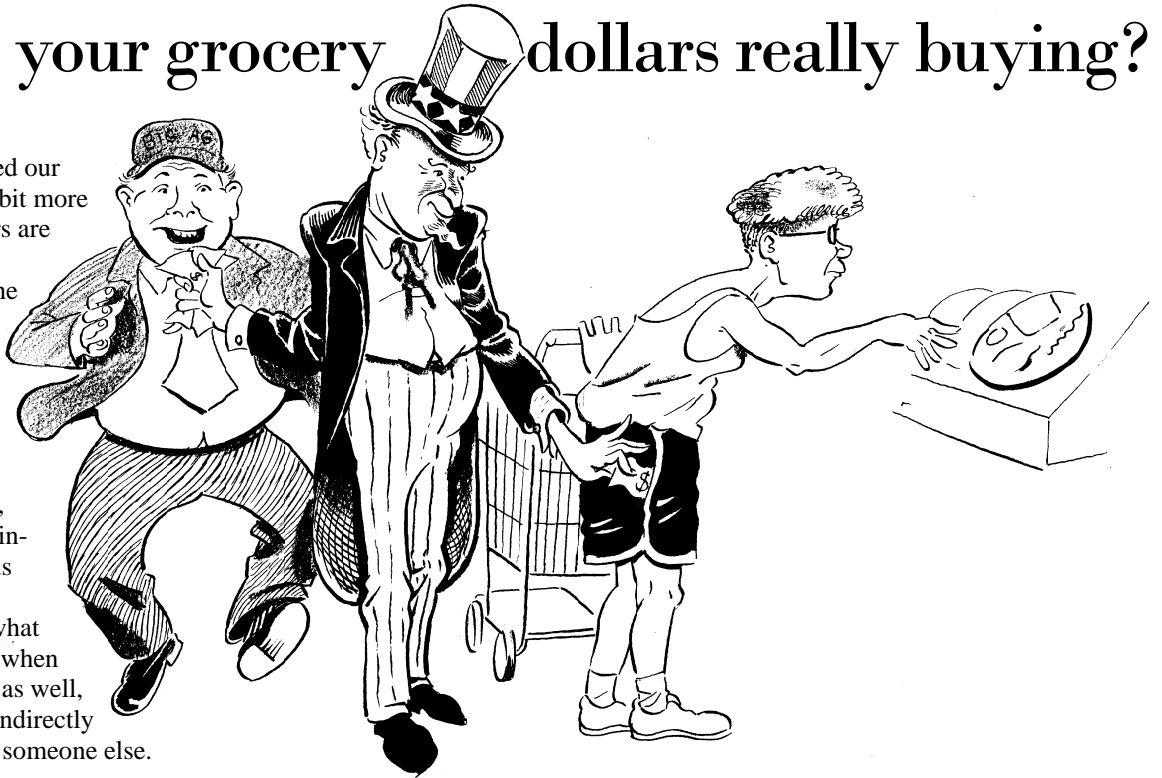
By Bob Neal

As key costs have pushed our prices up 15 percent in a bit more than a year, our customers are buying less Turkey.

Sales are down across the board (see Disturbing Signs, on Page 2).

The cost-price squeeze makes it increasingly difficult to hold to the standards of business practices, animal welfare, product quality and sustainability that have guided us through 22 seasons.

So, let's take a look at what you are really paying for when you buy our Turkey and, as well, what you are paying for indirectly when you buy food from someone else.



### BUSINESS PRACTICES

#### Wages

If you've heard the term "benefits burden," you may know all you need to know about how large businesses view their employees: as burdens. The "benefits burden" is the cost of a benefits package for employees.

The notion is almost universal in big business that employees are a drag, or a "burden," on their employers.

We see it differently. We view employees, especially our small year-round crew, as an investment rather than a cost. Our crew makes this farm work. So, we choose to invest in contented people who want to come to work every day.

To that end, unlike other farms in Maine, we pay well above the minimum wage. (Farms are not required to pay even the minimum wage!) This year, we started new hires at 32 percent

above the minimum wage.

With that wage structure, our farm is supporting two family units and contributing to the support of others. We offer holiday pay and in some cases paid vacation and personal days. At our busiest times (Fryeburg Fair, Thanksgiving), we share the wealth with our key employees so their earnings rise as ours rise.

We put "family first," so if an employee has a family or health problem (childcare, an ill partner, etc.) we expect the employee to take the time necessary to deal with it. In a small crew, this is tough on everyone, but it assures each employee that she will get time off if she needs it for personal emergencies.

#### Subsidies

Subsidies for farmers have been in the news lately. The types of subsidies in the farm bill are paid only to growers of

### The summer screed

corn, soy beans, cotton, wheat and rice.

But there are other subsidies to farmers, and you are paying for them.

For instance, some years ago a slaughterhouse that competes with us was suspended by the U.S. Department of Agriculture until the owner made some upgrades. The Maine Department of Agriculture stepped in and built a new slaughterhouse for our competitor. You paid \$30,000 for it with your taxes.

The state also bought an icemaker for another of our competitors. And you, of course, paid for it.

We paid to build our slaughterhouse, and we make ice with a machine we bought with our money. You help us pay for them when you buy our Turkey, so no one has forced you to buy our equipment.

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## Ambition, optimism show up in goals for the new season

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and still rotate birds from range to range, which is in keeping with Elaine's plan to improve our soil.

**GOAL NO. 3:** In addition to extending ranges to make birds more comfortable, we need to **build two new shelters** to which they can go during bad weather. This was a goal we missed last year.

**GOAL NO. 4:** Meeting the first three goals will make more space on the farm with which to meet the rising demand for our products.

We also have to **redefine our market** so we can serve it with 3,600 Turkeys. To that end, our fourth goal is limit the territory in which we sell to roughly the area between Yarmouth and Bangor.

This is the region of our greatest growth, and it seems we should bend

### Goals 2008

our efforts toward serving those who have most rewarded our efforts.

**GOAL NO. 5:** To accomplish these goals and to smooth out our season's operation, we are also **hiring more help**. We want a full-time farmhand starting in early May to help Elaine take care of the Turkeys. Last year, we had a four-days-a-week farmhand for five months who worked out so well that we want to extend that work week and work year.

We also need to expand the job of the cook, who helps prepare items for the farmers market in Brunswick and for delivery to our wholesale accounts.

And, come Labor Day, we'll add half-time casual work to help with the heavier

feeding and maintenance that Turkeys require as they reach market size.

**GOAL NO. 6:** This is a catchall category that is mostly **items of maintenance that we have deferred** over the past few years, thinking we would be retiring in 2010. (See The Turkey Times, winter edition.)

Our brooder house needs major repair, including wiring; replacing the roof, which is of so thin a gauge that its metal has become a sieve; and replacing the fiberglass insulation with foam insulation.

And, we need to renew some of our equipment at the Fryeburg Fair and to fill in gaps in our hand tools, gaps created over the years by mislaying tools and by people deciding they needed those tools more at home than we needed them here.

If we can meet these six goals, the farm will be in a good position for the

## So how'd we do in 2007? We were 3-1-2

The farm had a very successful season in 2007, but we came up short in meeting our goals. We met three of the six and partly met two others.

Here's the rundown on how we did and why.

**No. 1: Get back to our soil improvement project. PARTLY MET.** We'll know for sure where we stand on this goal as the perennial grasses begin to emerge on the ranges that farm manager Elaine Stevens limed and sowed last year.

We are almost certain that most will need reseeding because we had heavier than anticipated use of the ranges by the Turkeys last year and we had heavy rain in late autumn.

**No. 2: Return to rotating our birds. PARTLY MET.** We built two new yards, one of about a half-acre and another of about two-thirds of an acre. We also wanted to divide two full-acre yards to help us with rotation, but we had a hard time getting the materials — inventory stock at dealers isn't what it used to be — and simply ran out of time to finish the job.

The idea was to move birds every cou-

ple of weeks to permit the grasses to recover a bit during the season before the birds go back to each yard.

While we didn't permanently divide the yards, we got temporary fencing up in one yard and were able to move birds from one half to the other in that yard, which seemed to help the perennial grasses in that yard.

**No. 3: Build at least two shelters. MISSED.** We have natural or built shelter on five of our seven ranges. We had wanted to build shelters on the two exposed ranges but didn't even come close. We had a hard time finding posts for the job and an even harder time finding time.

**No. 4: Install a water line to our brooder. MET.** This seemed almost a personal goal for Elaine, and when we turned on the water in our brooder on Feb. 4 to get ready for our first flock of the year, we were instantly grateful for her hard work and determination.

Apart from the greater efficiency in providing water for baby birds, the new line obviates the need for a few hundred feet of (easily damaged) garden hose running to the ranges each year.

**No. 5: Maintain our flocks cholera- and erysipelas-free. MET.** This meant nothing more than vaccination and vigilance, and we gave our vaccination schedule the highest priority.

We also go on a daily "walkabout," in which we check the birds in each yard for appearance, cleanliness and healthiness.

During the walkabout, we clean and sanitize the waterers and clean up spilled feed. We also check fences for gaps that could let in critters that might also carry disease.

The cholera threat may be past, but we will continue to vaccinate against it. Erysipelas's organism has been in our soil since 1995, so we will need always to vaccinate against erysipelas.

**No. 6: Further improve our Fryeburg Fair operation. MET.**

We needed to eliminate the lines at the drinks counter and to structure our setup to handle the busy times without stretching our crew too thin.

By rearranging the drinks counter, we accomplished this. We also simplified the process by folding the price of drinks into the meal price. This reduced by nearly half the time we spent making change.

# The hidden cost of food vs. the real cost of food

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## Hire local people

Federal programs admit aliens to work for large farms. But we hire local people, to keep money in the local economy.

Since our business is highly seasonal, we need to rehire crew every year, which means added expense to advertise and interview applicants. Frankly, it sometimes means hiring people who don't work out, even for a short slaughter season, because of drug use, alcoholism or other behavioral issues. Last Thanksgiving, we had to let four people go before the job was completed.

But we have also hired some terrific workers and terrific people, and in some cases employees have become friends, too. In the past 19 years, we have had two farm managers, one for 10 years and one for nine.

And we have kept the money in the local economy.

## ANIMAL WELFARE

### Poults

Farm manager Elaine Stevens tells new employees, "Live birds have second priority." Animal welfare is that important to us. (Top priority goes to the meat.)

We almost always pick up our birds at the hatchery within hours of their hatching. The birds of all our competitors are shipped through the Post Office. We get our birds into the brooder quicker, which is better for their health and livability.

In February, Elaine and I went to West Virginia to pick up the just-hatched birds we are now slaughtering. We pick up our holiday birds in Massachusetts a few hours after they hatch.

Post Office birds spend up to 36 hours — in our most recent experience it took 72 hours to get birds from Eastern Ohio— packed in boxes. Ours spend about 5 hours in boxes when they come from Massachusetts and about 17 when they come from West Virginia.

Shipping birds by post from Ohio costs about 31cents apiece. And, of course, Congress subsidizes the Post Office, so you are also paying with your taxes for our competitors to ship their birds from the hatchery.

## The summer screed

We spent \$2 a bird to fetch the West Virginia poults and we spend about 37 cents apiece to get Massachusetts birds.

Under Elaine's supervision, the birds we picked up on May 8 are setting a record for livability this season at 98 percent. The industry standard is 80 to 92 percent.

### House cleanliness

We start our birds in a brooder house that can keep them at the 99 degrees — I won't even get into the cost increases for the propane to fire our stoves — they need until feathers begin to grow. Large conventional growers leave their birds inside their entire lives.

The birds in a house walk and sleep on litter of dried pine shavings. (The cost of shavings has nearly doubled in three years.) We use more than 300 bags a year, and we clean ("muck out") the house when the birds are three weeks old and then each week until they go outside to stay.

When we change flocks, we muck, clean and sanitize the house. Each cleaning takes between six and eight hours of labor. We clean and sanitize our concrete floor.

Confinement growers just pile new shavings atop old until a human can no longer stand up inside the house. Then they bring in loaders and haul it all away before laying new shavings on the floor and starting again. It can be two years or more between cleanings, and the floors cannot be sanitized because they are dirt or wood.

The industry term, by the way, for the manure-laden litter is "cake." If you've ever been in a poultry house that wasn't recently cleaned, you know why it is called that.

We cannot estimate how much it costs to leave cake for months on end and clean it out only when humans can no longer stand up in the houses, but we know that we spend a bit less than \$100 in wages each time we muck out. This year, we'll muck out about 20 times, so we are spending more than 50 cents a

bird to keep the house clean and hygienic. We doubt the confinement growers spend that much.

## PRODUCT QUALITY

### Gmo clean

Since 2001, we have used genetically clean feed almost exclusively. We object to genetic engineering (genetically modified organisms) on three grounds: First, engineers are playing God. A flounder is a fish and a tomato is a fruit for a reason. When gene-splicers put them together, they create something new. Europeans call it Frankenfood.

Second, genetic engineering underwent very little testing for its effects on the environment or on people with food sensitivities before it was approved.

Finally, there is mounting evidence that genetic engineering not only does not improve plant yields, it reduces them. The only gain in yield is in money to Monsanto and other corporations.

When Moulee Vallee of Richmond, P.Q., agreed to mix gmo-free feed for us, we took our business there. No U.S. mill was able or willing to do the job.

But we pay 9 to 13 percent more for this feed, and we ask you to share the extra cost with us. The feed delivered on July 8 cost \$488 a ton. Early last season, that level of feed cost \$322 a ton, and last year's price was 30 percent higher than the 2006 price. So, our feed-cost increase is 98 percent in two years.

Two thirds of the money we put into a Turkey is for feed. If two-thirds of our cost rises by 98 percent, then our total cost has risen by 66 percent.

It isn't surprising that we have been visited in the last month by representatives of two major feed companies, neither of which will provide gmo-free feed but both of which push their price advantage.

### Range raising

Several years ago, the poultry specialist from the University of Massachusetts visited our farm. As we stood beside our brooder house chatting about the Turkeys we were watching, he said,

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## Extra measures, extra costs keep the quality up

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“Of course, the birds prefer to be inside.”

I suggested (gently) that the behavior he was observing indicated otherwise. The birds were happily walking about munching on grasses and broadleaves, cooing as they went and going everywhere, except back into the house.

Our experience is that Turkeys prefer to be outside except when it is sleeting or is icy underfoot.

Outdoors, the birds are under less stress from crowding — conventional farms pack them in at a rate of a bird every two square feet and medicate them to head off stress — and thus they are less likely to fight.

We believe meat from a bird that spent its life walking about outdoors tastes better and has better texture than meat from a bird that hardly moved during its short indoor life.

In fact, the trade press from time to time runs articles on research into how to overcome the problem of pale, soft meat from birds raised in confinement.

We believe we already know the answer: Keep your birds outdoors and don't slaughter them prematurely.

Even in Maine, the other growers of large Turkey flocks keep their birds indoors.

There is some added cost to ranging the birds. For example, we have used about 15 work days this year to reset 600 feet of fence on two ranges.

We have about 400 more feet to reset, so we can figure the labor and materials for fencing this year amount to 25 days of wages and about \$800 in fence posts and fencing. That works out to nearly \$1 for every bird we raise this year.

We don't know the housing cost in a confinement barn, but knowing that confined birds live much shorter lives, so the barns house three flocks a year, we can be sure it doesn't run as high as \$1 a bird.

So you gain the advantage of a better quality of meat with better taste, and the cost of that quality is built into the price

### Slow growth

In addition to bringing our birds along more slowly by raising on range, we use mostly a variety of Turkey that is known as a slow grower. We get this variety from Bob's Turkey Farm in Lancaster, Mass.

Where conventional Turkeys go to

### The summer screed

slaughter as young as 12 weeks, our holiday birds take at least 20 weeks to mature. We believe this gives them better taste and texture because their bodies aren't working overtime to put on pounds.

Our birds eat about as much grain as conventional birds, but they eat less per day so their bodies don't work so hard to grow and make meat (and manure).

We have compared the meat from our birds with that of conventional birds when we have had to buy conventional for our concession at the Fryeburg Fair. We find that on a large tom, we get about 2 pounds more of breast meat and about a pound more of thigh and wing meat from our birds than from conventional birds. And the cook has noted several times that the meat of our birds is firmer than that of conventional birds.

### Food safety

According to an article in Poultry USA, the trade journal for the poultry business, a study by a university a few years ago found that the eviscerating method that is most effective in stopping food contamination is the hand eviscerating method most widely used in the 1950s. All the “improvements” in the past 50 years have improved efficiency but have reduced food safety.

Guess which method we use. The overhead track and hand eviscerating from the '50s. In fact, the motor driving our overhead track is so old that the builder's plate shows no Zip Code — those were introduced in the 1960s — for the maker's address.

With the overhead track, we hang carcasses on shackles and the eviscerating crew removes first the giblets and then the waste by hand as the shackles move slowly beneath the track.

A conventional system also uses a track, but instead of cleaning the cavity by hand, workers insert a vacuum tube and suck the eviscera into a holding tank. It is possible, even likely, that under time pressure to keep the line moving no one ever looks or reaches

into the cavity to make sure everything has been removed.

Our system means more labor (by local people) and therefore more cost. But it also means a greater likelihood of a clean cavity. Any number of customers has told us that they never bought poultry in a supermarket that was as clean as the Turkeys they have bought from us.

### SUSTAINABILITY

#### An example: Packing trays

Sustainability has been a guiding principle for us from Day One. At every turn, we look to use equipment and supplies from renewable resources.

One example is fencing, for which we use cedar posts that last in the ground about as long as it took for the post to grow, so they are not only renewable but the supply is sustainable. Steel fence posts can be easier and cheaper. But steel is not renewable.

An example more visible to you is the trays in which we pack some of our products. We have always used molded fiber (paper) trays. Today, the industry standard is a polystyrene tray that won't biodegrade for 10,000 years.

The polystyrene tray costs about 4 cents. Its molded fiber counterpart costs 12 cents. So, we're paying triple to get a tray that is degradable.

The molded fiber tray, though, is fully recyclable. At our house, we start winter fires in our wood stove with them.

Through taxes and/or fees, you are paying additionally for these polystyrene trays because they have to be hauled off to a landfill to not rot for eternity.

### SUMMARY

At almost every step of the process, we have taken decisions in favor of employee contentedness, animal health and welfare, meat quality and safety and of sustainability. In each case, our path is likely to cost more than the conventional path. We have been able to count on you to help us pay for these methods, and we hope we can continue to count on you for that.

But, we can't do it alone.

See the short article on Page 6 about helping us decide on future policies.

## Recipe

### Way-too-easy Turkey parmesan

- 1 lb. Turkey breast cutlets
- 3 Tbsp. unbleached flour
- 1/4 lb. butter
- 1/4 cup freshly grated parmesan cheese
- 1 cup milk
- salt and pepper to taste

In a skillet over moderate heat, sauté the cutlets in 2 table-spoons of the butter until they are no longer pink on the inside, about 5 minutes on each side. Set aside the cooked cutlets, leaving the pan drippings in the skillet.

Melt the rest of the butter in the skillet. Whisk the flour into the milk and add the mixture to the melted butter and pan drippings. Continue to whisk the mixture until the sauce thickens. Add more milk if necessary. Just before the sauce comes to the boil, pour it over the cutlets and serve.

## Thanksgiving and Christmas orders are in order

You're probably not thinking much about Thanksgiving or Christmas yet as you seek shade and cooling breezes amid a Maine summer. But we are.

And a few customers are too, as they have begun asking when we will begin taking Thanksgiving and Christmas orders. For those customers who buy our year-round items, the answer is now.

We've allocated 800 Turkeys for retail sales at Thanksgiving and 200 at Christmas. Those Turkeys will be available at our farm in New Sharon, at the Crystal Spring Farm in Brunswick and at Orono.

Our customers reserve by size, and we do our level best to meet their re-

quests. Most years, we are within two pounds of the desired size on better than 97 percent of our orders. When you order, please give us an acceptable range of sizes, such as 14 to 17 lbs., that you can use. Early orders get the highest priority in sizing.

We are having a good growing season, and we expect the full range of sizes again this year.

Because feed and fuel prices continue to rise, we cannot yet set the price. We hope we can hold it below \$3 a pound. Farmers we have spoken with in Massachusetts and Vermont are already flirting with a \$3 price, and they don't pay to ship their feed as far as we ship ours.

We offer three ways for you to reserve your Turkeys for Thanksgiving and/or Christmas.

The first is to fill out the form at the bottom left and post it to us.

The second way is to e-mail us at turkeyfarm@gwi.net. The third is to telephone 778-2889 and leave the order with the person who answers or with the answering machine. In each case, we will confirm the order in writing (never by telephone).

We prefer to use e-mail both for receiving orders and for confirmations. It is more reliable than the Post Office, and somewhat quicker for us and less expensive.

Your confirmation probably won't come back right away, but if you haven't received it within a couple of weeks, jiggle our chain to make sure we received your order.

Pickup for Thanksgiving at our farm-store will be 9 a.m. to 6 p.m. Sunday, Nov. 23, through Wednesday, Nov. 26.

The Brunswick pickup will be from 9 a.m. to 1 p.m. on Wednesday, Nov. 26.

The Orono pickup will be on Monday afternoon, Nov. 24, at a time and site we'll confirm later.

Christmas pickup at the farm will be 9 a.m. to 6 p.m. on Dec. 22 and 23. At Brunswick, it will be at 9 a.m. on Dec. 21, and at Orono it will be at 8 a.m. on Dec. 22.

To find out more about holiday Turkeys, just call 778-2889 or e-mail us at turkeyfarm@gwi.net.

### Holiday Order Form 184

Please reserve for me the following Turkey(s):

THANKSGIVING	Number	Pounds	CHRISTMAS	Number	Pounds
Farm-fresh	_____	_____		_____	_____
Smoked	_____	_____		_____	_____

I will pick up at (Check one):  The Farm     Orono     Brunswick

Name \_\_\_\_\_

Address (postal) \_\_\_\_\_

Town \_\_\_\_\_ Zip \_\_\_\_\_

E-mail address \_\_\_\_\_

Telephone No. \_\_\_\_\_

## Here's another way to save on Turkey purchases

We encourage people who eat food to join together and buy from us in larger quantities.

When that happens — sometimes it is called a buying club, sometimes a buyer co-op — we offer our products at wholesale prices, which range from 20 to 33 percent lower than our retail prices.

Here's how it works:

A community of like-minded people comes together, usually by telephone or e-mail, and places an order. One person collates the order and gets it to us. We fill the order and deliver it to the collator, who in turn will oversee the breakdown and distribution of the order.

We have served buying clubs or co-ops for nearly 20 years. Our longest-

**Buying clubs**

standing co-op is Downeast, where we meet Alan Groh in Ellsworth three or four times a year with orders for a club of about a dozen people.

We have served a family co-op in Winthrop, which broke up when the collator moved to Kennebunk, a neighborhood co-op in Scarborough, another in South Portland (active) and others around the state.

To make a buying club work, you need:

1. A group of people who don't want to compromise on the quality of their food.
2. A dynamic collator who will devote two to four hours to each order, about equally divided between placing the order and breaking it down.
3. A total purchase by the buying club of \$1,000 a year. We offer the whole-

sale prices when a buying club begins if it appears the club is likely to meet the \$1,000 annual threshold.

4. A single order and a single check to pay for the order.

In return, we offer wholesale prices on all products, prompt delivery to the Crystal Spring Farmers Market or to the home or workplace of the collator or of another buying-club member and the finest quality and widest variety of Turkey items, including our two new sausages (blueberry-maple and garlic lovers'), that you can find in Maine. But you already knew that last part.

Interested? Need more information? Contact Bob at 778-2889 or e-mail us at [turkeyfarm@gwi.net](mailto:turkeyfarm@gwi.net). We'll do our best to help you set up a buying club. We'll even refer people to you who might be interested in joining.

## As to containing production costs, you tell us

One or both of two things is likely to happen with our cost-price dilemma.

We may have to abandon our commitment to gmo-free grain, and/or we may have to raise prices again soon. We have never raised prices twice in a season, let alone twice in four months. What we had hoped would be our lone price increase in 2008 was on

**Feedback**

May 1. It averaged 6 percent.

We always want to hear from our customers, but on the issue of the cost of feed, we particularly want you to tell us whether you prefer a price increase — and you would continue to buy in the same quantity at a higher price — or you prefer us to revert to conventional grain from gmo-free grain.

If we retreat from gmo-free grain, we probably cannot reduce prices this year

but could at least hold them steady. It is possible that next year or soon thereafter we could cut back some on the price increases of 2007 and 2008.

If we continue to use gmo-clean feed, only a reversal in feed prices would enable us to hold to our current prices.

Tell us what you believe we should do.

Talk to us at market, or call Bob at 778-2889 or write to us by e-mail at [turkeyfarm@gwi.net](mailto:turkeyfarm@gwi.net).

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