

The Turkey Times

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It isn't easy being small (or green)

By BOB NEAL

The American dream comes down to the freedom to take a chance on accomplishing something, whether it is building an enterprise, doing something for other people, or just making a pile of money.

It has been that way for us ever since my sister gave me six tomato plants in

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1972, tomatoes we transplanted into the backyard of our rented house in Kansas City. Those tomatoes carried a large swarm of the farming bug, and we were bit big time.

One great satisfaction of building the dream is defeating the monsters who lurk at dream's edge, ready to pounce. Regular customers know that last year we threw off our backs the huge monster of fowl cholera that had plagued our flocks for three seasons.

The satisfaction from that victory is deep and lasting.

But in our 21st year of fulfilling our pastoral dream, the monsters seem to be coming at us with increasing frequency, none (well, maybe one) even vaguely so threatening as the cholera but cumulatively enough to frustrate us and our crew almost daily.

As my wife, Marilyn, says, "Farming should be getting easier after 20 years, not harder."

The obstacles springing up before us stem from two sources and almost entirely from a single cause. The sources are big corporations and the state government, and the cause is the huge size to which everything is geared these days.

We believe that our experience might be typical of farmers and other small businesspeople in Maine.

The starting point of our approach to farming was to raise Turkeys in as close as we can to a natural pattern.

To that end, we have, among other things: fed our birds grain certified not to have been genetically engineered; used molded paper instead of foam trays for our products; produced most of the lumber used in our buildings, gates and shelters. The list could go on, but you get the idea.

We hope that when we retire we can look at the land — we'll probably have to tear down the buildings because we can't afford the taxes on them — and say that we left it better than we had found it.

Our commitment to these principles is being sorely tested, and the temptation to hasten our retirement is growing.

Let's look at a few examples. First, big corporations.

For 15 years, we have used a tissue pad, sometimes called a "soaker," in our meat trays to absorb moisture as the meat thaws. It improves food safety by keeping the moisture from leaking onto counters or plates.

The soakers are made by Cry-O-Vac, a major manufacturer of packaging. For 12 years, I could phone a distributor in New Hampshire, and the cases of soakers would arrive in a few days. Then, that distributor couldn't get them, and two others that I had used also said they could no longer get the pads.

In March, I called Cry-O-Vac for the name of its distributor in Maine. The distributor asked me only one question: "Will you buy a trailer load at a time?" We might use six cases of soakers a year.

He said he would not sell Cry-O-Vac products to me but he would find a "re-

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The joys of being small in the world made for big

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distributor” who would. I have never heard from him again.

So, I e-mailed Cry-O-Vac, and a representative called to say he would speak with the distributor, who is in Gorham, and that the distributor would ship me cases if I would pay the shipping. I agreed, but I have still not heard from the distributor in Gorham, three weeks later.

Those soaker pads fit into trays made of compressed paper, an environmentally sound alternative to an extruded foam, usually known as Styrofoam, that is not biodegradable.

When three wholesalers said they could no longer get molded-fiber trays, I talked to the Manchester, N.H., representative of Pactiv, the manufacturer. His first words were, “I want to assure you that your Pactiv representative is on the job for you. How can I help?”

We never heard from him again, despite phone messages and e-mails to headquarters.

We may be able to acquire the Pactiv trays, but a different size than we have used for 15 years, from a company in Phoenix, Ariz. But they are a special order item, which about doubles their cost.

We have had similar experiences with Agile Corp., a manufacturer of brooder stoves in Missouri; Paper Pak Industries, which makes a pad that competes with Cry-O-Vac; Central Supplies, a large distributor in Manchester, N.H.; and Unisource, a national distributor of paper and packaging whose Bangor representative works from Jacksonville, Fla.

We are still looking for soakers, and if the company in Phoenix can't get fiber trays for us, we'll resume that search. We found used brooder stoves used through Uncle Henry's when Agile ignored our inquiries..

As tough as it is dealing with corporations, none of them has the power directly to put us out of business. But the State of Maine does, and recently Don Hoenig, a veterinarian in the agriculture department, telephoned. He danced around several issues of bird health, but when I mentioned that the Province of Quebec had made it illegal to raise any bird outdoors, he jumped right

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on to what I took to be the reason for his call.

“The commissioner (of agriculture) has the authority to require you to raise all your birds indoors,” Hoenig said. With that bit of news dropped on me, the purpose of his call was fulfilled and the phone call wound down quickly.

Hoenig's call fits the pattern of our experience with the state ag department. The pattern is an attitude that favors large farm and food enterprises at the expense of small farmers and producers. It is the reason we call the ag bureaucracy the Department of Farmer Elimination.

On Dec. 8, 1994, Randy Trahan, an inspector in the department, told me: “Our goal is to reduce the number of food producers in Maine to 50 or less (sic) so we can control the food industry.” I hope that when he said “our,” he meant his.

On March 12, 1995, I asked Trahan's supervisor, Gerard Prentiss, how his department had responded to reports that a producer in North Carolina had inadvertently shipped a trailer load of bad Turkeys to a huge Maine supermarket chain at Thanksgiving 1994. His answer: “We let the big operators like (he named the chain store) pretty much inspect themselves. We concentrate on the little guys like you.”

That attitude of favoring the big at the expense of the small has recurred in the state's takeover from the USDA of the inspection of some meat and poultry operations, including grower-producer poultry farms such as ours. Since the state takeover, two of the five grower-producers have gone out of business, and virtually all micro-poultry farms in Maine, which had been accepted by the USDA, are out of the business. Most were diversified farms that raised poultry as part of their overall operation.

The state enforces its big-only attitude primarily by requiring micro-grow-

wers to invest more money than they have in meeting state rules.

For example, the state is requiring every grower, regardless of size, to build a slaughterhouse or to truck birds to a house that has a state inspector present to watch the slaughters. Some years there is no such slaughterhouse, and no one can afford to build a plant when she raises only a couple of hundred birds as part of a diversified farm.

And, the state is requiring evermore spending inside that slaughterhouse. The state's poultry inspector last year told me that the state would thenceforth require all slaughterhouses, no matter how small, to install a “hang line” similar to ours.

That is a slowly moving track from which shackles suspend the carcasses for eviscerating. Hang lines minimize the contact of each carcass with surfaces and with other carcasses. But they are expensive to buy, install and operate.

Again, a grower killing just a few hundred birds a year cannot afford a hang line. And, a hang line is not the only way to ensure food safety during evisceration.

When we were under federal jurisdiction, we had to buy a state retail license for \$10. The feds inspect and review plants but don't issue licenses. Now that the state has taken over, our license fee has risen to \$140, although Gov. John Baldacci promised “No New Taxes.”

Two years ago, we received our license from the state, signed by one David Gagnon. Two days later, I received a letter from Gagnon informing me that the state was putting me out of business because I hadn't paid for a license. It took the intervention of our state senator, Chandler Woodcock, who carried the license from my wall to the state ag department at AMHI, to convince Gagnon that he had in fact issued me a license!

Virtually every step the state ag department has taken in inspection has had the effect of shrinking the state's tiny infrastructure of meat and poultry growers because each step requires more capital

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and a larger base to support the spending of that capital. A back-to-the-lander wanting to build a diversified farm with some meat critters hasn't a chance.

So why are we so concerned about preserving our competition?

The presence of other growers helps all poultry farmers because it keeps the idea in people's minds that they can easily buy Maine-raised poultry. If there are only three growers, and only one of them (us) has a retail operation, people will stop thinking about buying poultry from Maine and just take the easy way out when they are at the supermarket.

This big-only attitude prevails in the ag

department but it shows up in other department as well.

From the department of human services a few years ago came the example of a restaurant inspector who, on seeing our new refrigerator truck at the Common Ground Fair, gushed to her partner, "We should force every food booth to buy one of these." Her partner shushed her in a hurry, but she had already betrayed the "let's force them to get bigger" attitude of state government.

Few food vendors could afford to borrow \$55,000 for a refrigerator truck and would be pushed out of business by such a rule. We couldn't have afforded it, either, if we didn't use the truck year-round.

The state tax bureau struck a big blow against small businesses last year with its new rules for sales tax certificates, which exempt some items from the tax until they reach the final consumer.

We now must mail a copy of our sales tax certificate (at our expense) to every supplier from whom we buy. Big companies can just run off copies and mail them (at their own expense, of course), but for us that means going 10 miles to town to buy photocopies.

We have been gearing down toward retirement. We peaked at 4,400 birds and now raise about 3,200. We had planned to cut back a couple of more times before finally retiring about 2010.

But the state continues to demand bigger and bigger, so we may reach a point where instead of scaling back another notch, we just quit to avoid all the hassle.

If we were starting out today under state jurisdiction instead of in 1986, as we did, under federal jurisdiction, we wouldn't even bother. We would dream another dream and pursue it free of the clutches of the state's ag department monster lurking at the edges of our dream.

CSA membership signups slow to a trickle

As our Community Supported Agriculture project grows, each new growth step becomes more difficult.

So it is this year. Share purchases and renewals began strongly in May, then dropped in June. We are looking to quicken the pace as we head into high summer.

We set as a goal this year having 67 customers buying a total of 83 shares.

As of July 20, we had 47 new shares bought. They break down as 11 new sharers, 35 renewed sharers and one new sharer who has already bought a second share this year. The total investment was \$7,650.

Twelve shares have lapsed, and that is triple the number of dropouts last year. We hope to pull back eight or more of those 12.

If you're not familiar with CSA, it is a Japanese-European invention that lets people who eat food participate actively in the getting of their food.

CSA takes many forms. In our form, customers buy shares in the year's production. We pay interest on the shares, and the sharer can collect proceeds of her share anytime within the year.

Shares begin at \$100, on which we pay 6 percent interest, and rise in \$50 incre-

ments. The interest rises 2 percentage points per increment, so a \$150 share brings Turkey worth \$162, and so on. To sign up, send in the form below with a check.

Some people work for a share, receiving \$162 in items from our farm in exchange for two days work.

The work dates:

- Sept. 25, 26** Fryeburg Fair preparation
- Oct. 9, 10** Fryeburg Fair aftermath

- Nov. 15-21** Thanksgiving
- Nov. 27-28** Thanksgiving cleanup
- Dec. 18-20** Christmas
- Dec. 27-30** Put farm to bed for winter

The shifts are eight hours. The work is cleaning, repairing, loading, unloading, packing, etc For more information about work shares, call Bob at 778-2889 or e-mail us at turkeyfarm@gwi.net.

If you know the dates you'd like to work, just sign up on the form below.

CSA Order Form

Fill out and send to The Turkey Farm, 209 Mile Hill Road, New Sharon, Maine 04955:

Please sign me up for the following share in Community Supported Agriculture:

[] Paid (circle) \$100 \$150 \$200 \$250 \$300 \$350 \$400
(I have enclosed a check for that amount)

[] Work Share, and I want to work these dates: _____

Name _____

Address _____

Town _____ State _____ Zip _____

e-mail _____ Telephone No. _____

Holiday ordering will begin on Aug. 1

As you know from previous issues of The Turkey Times, we are changing our holiday ordering system this year.

We'll give first priority for orders to people who buy year-round items from us. Second priority will go to customers who have bought holiday Turkeys from us for at least two years. Third priority will be to customers who first bought from us in 2005 or are new to us this year.

Our farm cannot survive on holiday Turkeys alone, so we are thanking those who keep up going the other 11 months a year by giving them first choice at holiday time.

We will begin taking orders from those year-round customers on Aug. 1. These are the people who subscribe to our Community Supported Agriculture project (see Page 3), those who come to our farmstore January through October and those who buy Turkey items from us at the Crystal Spring Farmers Market in Brunswick.

We'll open the order season for repeat holiday customers on Sept. 15 and for new customers on Oct. 15.

Under this new system, we'll also give early orders the priority in sizing. Every year, the last few customers to arrive have to take a Turkey outside the size range they had ordered. This year, we'll flag orders to ensure that

early orderers also get first crack at their preferred sizes.

So, if you're a year-round customer, the time is upon us for you to order for Thanksgiving and/or Christmas. Use the form below, e-mail us at turkeyfarm@gwi.net or phone us at 778-2889. Or order when you come to pick up other items at the farmstore or at Crystal Spring.

If you aren't yet sure of the size of bird you'll need, order anyway. We

usually can accommodate changes in the sizes.

When you order, please let us know whether you'll pick up your bird at our farm (Nov. 19-22), at Crystal Spring (Nov. 22) or at Orono (Nov. 20).

We expect the price at all pickups to be \$2.39 a pound. This is an increase from last year for customers who come to our farmstore and was necessary to cover higher costs for fuel, packaging and labor.

Holiday Order Form

Please reserve for me, _____ (number) farm-fresh or smoked (circle one)

Turkey(s) of _____ pounds each for _____ Thanksgiving and /or _____

(number) of farm-fresh or smoked (circle one) Turkey(s) of _____ pounds for

Christmas. I will pick up at (Check one):

_____ The Farm _____ Orono _____ Brunswick

Name _____

Address (snail mail) _____

Town _____ Zip _____

E-mail address _____

Telephone No. _____

The Turkey Farm
209 Mile Hill Road
New Sharon, Maine 04955
turkeyfarm@gwi.net
778-2889

Please forward