

# The Turkey Times

Volume XXI, Issue 3 — Spring 2011

Published by The Turkey Farm, New Sharon, Maine



## Toward sustainability

By Bob Neal

Purists will tell you that almost nothing is less natural than farming. They're right.

If you see "natural" as a state of nature in which humans join other animal forms in hunting and gathering their food, then the tilling of soil and the husbandry of livestock aren't very natural. But with humans having overrun the planet, it's unlikely that we can spend 90 percent of our days

chasing furry little critters and picking berries.

Especially in Maine.

So, as the earth's human population climbs toward 7 billion, we must not only look for ways to slow if not reverse population growth but also figure out how to feed all those people far into the unforeseeable future.

We haven't come up with an answer better than farming. So, we who farm need to figure out, one by one and on our individual pieces of land, how to feed people yet leave the land and its surroundings in at least as sound a condition as we found them so the land can continue feeding way too many people.

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## Can the world really feed itself?

That is not an idle question.

Many worry and wonder that as more and more people and buildings and roads take up what used to be farm and forest we won't be able to make food for all those people living and working in all those buildings and driving on all those roads.

But an Australian economist, Colin Clark, ran the numbers in the 1950s and calculated that even then we had the know-how to feed a planet of 12 billion people at the level that Western Europe was feeding its people 60 years ago.

To do so, Clark figured, would require farming at roughly the intensity of the average Danish farmer of the day. That

could well mean somewhat smaller farms and consequently more farmers. It would mean hand-tending many crops, such as table vegetables, in many cases. And it would mean re-opening land to tillage.

Oddly, it might mean both more mechanical farming (plowing and tilling land, harvesting) and more hand labor (cultivating, harvesting).

Guess what's happening in Maine right now. The number of farms and farmers is increasing while the size of farms is decreasing. Sounds exactly like what Colin Clark believed was necessary to feed a growing world population.

## How we use our decision tree of renewability

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Fortunately, nature builds surpluses into everything, and enlightened humans will use the surpluses and recharge the base. To use a financial metaphor, we can live off the interest and maintain the principal.

Enter The Turkey Farm.

We bought this piece of ground in 1980, an old dairy and vegetable farm that was put out of business in the 1950s when the state ordered all dairy farms to install mechanical refrigeration.

Our 60 acres — half of the old Henry Parlin farm — had been used as the town's road garage and as a hobby farm since Henry Parlin stopped farming. We were the first to try to turn it back into a productive farm.

In cruising these 10 cleared and 50 wooded acres, we could see that Henry Parlin mostly farmed sustainably. Yes, there are old car-body parts dumped not far from our house, and every so often our chain saw finds barbed wire embedded in a tree that as a sapling had stood as a fence post.

But for the most part, we see little evidence that Henry Parlin or his predecessors were ever here. We hope that, when we pass the farm on to another operator or retire and tear down the buildings, we will have left the land better than we had found it.

By better, we mean without permanent damage to the soil and, in the best of outcomes, with soil and woodlot

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healthier than they had been in 1980. If we farm sustainably, that will happen.

Farmers make dozens of decisions a day. Most are daily choices such as whether to mend fences or muck out a brooder. But others are planning and policy decisions.

In making planning and policy decisions, we look always at a decision tree for guidance. The top of the tree is sustainability. Below that are recyclability, local origin, business ethics, etc.

First, we look for an item that we produce here sustainably.

If we can't produce the item here, can we get it from a local farm or business that offers sustainably produced items?

If we cannot get it here or locally can we get it sustainably produced from elsewhere?

If an item isn't sustainably produced, can it be recycled of unrenovable material, such as metal?

While metal comes from an unrenovable source, it is recyclable, though at great cost for energy. (When we lived in Warren, Ohio, a short train every evening passed in front of our house taking steel scrap to the Copperweld mill, which made high-quality steel entirely of scrap. But to do so, Copperweld had to use high heat from electricity for which it paid [in the

'80s] about a penny a kilowatt hour.)

If we absolutely cannot find a renewable or recyclable item, can we adopt an alternative method or item?

Sometimes, we must accept for now that we cannot get a renewable or recyclable material. But we keep it on a list of items to be replaced when a renewable items become available.

We were able a few years ago to begin buying paper take-out boxes for our Turkey dinner concession. We had been using up to three cases of Styrofoam boxes a year. We switched, and three cases of Styrofoam are now staying out of the dump.

When we reach the unrenovable decision stage, it often means plastic, which comes almost entirely from petroleum.

Besides the issue of plastic going straight into the waste stream, plastic implements, such as shovels, are seldom repairable. A frayed edge on a metal shovel may slow the mucking process but a split plastic shovel stops the mucking until you go to town and buy a new shovel.

Here are other examples of how our decision tree has governed our choices.

For 22 years, we cut all our fence posts from cedar we harvested here. In 2008, we bought about 100 posts harvested on a nearby farm. When those are used up, we will resume harvesting posts on our land.

The alternative to native cedar is steel  
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# Every building on our farm has lumber from our farm

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posts, not from a renewable resource but recyclable.

We also build all of our gates from lumber milled from our trees or from locally harvested and milled lumber. Manufactured gates of steel or plastic are easier to buy, but we can operate higher on the decision tree.

We have 300 to 400 fence posts for nearly a mile of fencing and 15 gates. Northern white cedar posts last 15 to 20 years, so our woodlot should be able to provide us with fence posts into perpetuity. Gates need to be rehung every couple of years, but they last about as long as cedar posts.

The fencing, of course, is steel, and when it is worn out, usually from the bottom strands rotting from contact with the ground, they go onto our "tin pile." Every few years, a "junkie" comes by and takes the tin to Oakland for recycling.

All the buildings on the farm were constructed with at least some lumber harvested and sawn here.

Our slaughterhouse and store and our primary brooder are sheathed with our pine boards. Our secondary brooder and our house are framed with our hemlock timbers. And our "barn," a 20-by-20 shed, was framed entirely with timbers from an old barn we tore down and sheathed with pine boards harvested and sawn four miles away.

Our Turkeys begin their lives with us in the primary brooder house, where they live until their feathers have grown in, about five weeks usually.

During that time, they are constantly on wood shavings, which we buy from a planing mill in Mercer, six miles away. The shavings, mostly pine and cedar, absorb most of the droppings.

Every week or so, we muck out the brooder and stack the used litter. In a year or two it has turned into pretty good compost.

We spread that compost on our garden and we offer it to anyone who wants to use it on her garden.

Using spent animal bedding to fer-

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tilize crops is as old as any farming practice. But it is still useful and puts all of nature's materials (wood, manure, urea) back into the soil to strengthen growth.

You could travel through America's cornbelt for hours and never see a farmer spreading manure. Few Iowa farms keep animals because life is easier for a farmer who fertilizes with petroleum byproducts and winters in Florida with no animals to fret over.

Sometimes, we can even recycle here.

When we replaced the roof on the primary brooder house this spring, we used the old metal roofing atop a canopy we had built last year for some of our food concession equipment. The leftover tin strips will make fine siding for shelters we build for our Turkeys.

When it comes to processing and packaging, we can't look to the farm for materials but we still look to our decision tree.

For example, the trays in which we pack link sausages, cutlets, thighs and other items are fiber molded entirely of recycled paper.

They are made in Waterville.

If you buy something from us packed in one of those trays, you are already using recycled paper. You can continue the cycle (pun intended)

by using the paper trays to start a fire in your woodstove. Turns out, they make great kindling.

We use about eight cases of the trays a year, so we are avoiding putting more than 4,000 Styrofoam trays into landfills, where they would remain unchanged for 10,000 years or more.

We use more than a dozen cases of paper towels a year. Paper towels at the supermarket can be unbelievably cheap if you shop for bargains. But those towels are invariably made of

*(Continued on page 4)*

## **Organic or sustainable?**

Let's get this one out of the way right away.

No, we are not organic and we have no plans to apply for organic certification.

Many people, especially suburbanites who support the organic movement, believe it produces food that has never been treated with pesticides or herbicides.

Wrong-o.

Organics takes its cue from sustainability. It shuns all use of unrenovable inputs. But it allows pesticides and herbicides so long as these are from renewable sources. It also requires withdrawal times after the use of pesticides and herbicides so those chemicals can drain from the food.

So, organic agriculture starts at the same place we start: renewability. Whenever we put something to use, we try to draw it from a renewable source, whether it be a tree or a grass or an animal.

We have not been able to go fully organic, primarily because of the cost of organic feed. Historically, organic feed cost about triple what we pay for feed. That gap has narrowed to about double, but mostly because the cost of conventional feed has soared. Even with the gap narrowed, we are paying nearly \$500 for an international tonne of grain and would have to pay nearly \$1,000 for a tonne of organic grain. We expect to use a bit more than 100 tonnes of grain this year.

We use feed that is free of genetically engineered grains, and we pay a premium of about 13 percent for that.

Our surveys of our customers have uncovered little interest in our going organic. Since feed accounts for nearly two-thirds of the money we put into growing a Turkey, a doubling of the cost of feed, which we have seen since 2008, adds one-third to our growing cost. We are afraid that to double our current feed cost, thus adding one-third again to our production cost, would drive away too many customers for our farm to survive.

## Paper and plastic — all biodegradable

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heavily bleached paper, and the unrenewable bleaching chemicals pollute rivers downstream from paper mills all over the country.

We use, instead, a brown towel made of unbleached paper, a good proportion of it recycled. When we began using these

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towels, they cost the same for a case of 15 rolls as the bleached towels, about \$15. Today, a case costs nearly \$45. We can do far better at the store in price terms, but we couldn't do better than using unbleached towels.

Finally, when you carry your purchase away from our stand or farmstore, we have packed it in a brown paper bag or in a plastic bag.

All paper bags come from renewable resources, the brown Kraft bags have not been bleached.

And we are converting to biodegradable plastic bags for some items. Two of the four sizes of plastic bags we use are degradable. When the other two sizes run out, we will replace them with biodegradable plastic bags, too, which decompose and return to nature when you throw them away wet.

So, when you buy Turkey from us, know that we doing our best to farm sustainably. We aren't there yet — see sidebar below — but we are moving in that direction.

## Readying new items for outdoor market

Following a successful winter market at Fort Andross, we are shifting the focus of our sales for the next six months to the Crystal Spring Market in Brunswick.

The market opens on May 7, on the Pleasant Hill Road near the Woodside Road. We will sell there for 22 Saturdays (through Sept. 24) from 8:30 a.m. to 12:30 p.m. After the Fryeburg Fair, we will return to Crystal Spring for the final three Saturdays in October (Oct. 15, 22 and 29).

The map prepared by market master Bob Goddard shows us in the same spot as the past nine years, right next to Karen Marston's Bowdoin Baking Co. We will have a new neighbor on the other side because Seth Kroeck, the farmer at Crystal Spring, has decided not to sell at market this year.

We'll take our entire line of 40 or so items to Crystal Spring, only more of each item as we have more space (200 square feet outdoors but only 77 indoors).

New this year?

You may not notice the first innovation, but it's important to us. In keeping with the general tone of this issue (sustainability, local), we have begun buying spices for our sausages and other items from Gryffon Ridge Spice Merchants in Dresden. Yes, they are the spice merchants you see at Fort Andross and Crystal Spring.

Christine and Rick Suydam, the owners, are our back-to-back neighbors at Fort Andross and set up almost directly across from us at Crystal Spring. We

can get organic spices — we use more than 30 in our products — from them in quantities small enough to remain potent with even casual use and at prices we can fold into the prices of our items.

We are tickled to be able to add yet another local supplier to our vendors.

In 2009, when we sponsored a Local Harvest Supper to benefit the New Sharon Congregational Church UCC, Christine and Rick donated sage, basil and parsley they had grown. The supper — everything was local, even the butter, which our pastor made from milk donated by Longfellow's Creamery in Avon — was a big success and we hope to resume it this year.

Look for our new shepherd's pie this spring, made with our Turkey and Maine potatoes. We'll offer it in limited quantities each week to avoid having to try to freeze the mashed potatoes.

In June, look for the return of bratwurst and smoked Bavarian summer sausage. Until then, look for our spring line, korb and Swedish potato sausage. Bratwurst will replace the potato sausages we pack in the spring, and the Bavarian will replace kielbasa for the season.

Look also for fresh Turkey items far earlier in the season. We started our first flock on Jan. 18 and expect to begin dressing them in mid- to late May. We'll have fresh items about five times from that flock before we begin dressing our May-started birds in late September. Look for fresh items again in late September and in October.

See you at market.

## FOUR PLACES WHERE WE STILL FALL SHORT, AND WHAT WE'RE DOING ABOUT IT

**1. Propane burning for the brooder.** Replace roof and insulation. To reduce the amount of unrenwable propane we burn, we converted several years ago to radiant stoves. This spring we replaced the roof and will soon reinsulate it. We expect this can cut propane use by nearly half.

**2. Use of electricity (mostly generated from unrenwable resources) to run freezer.** We'll replace the insulation in the ceiling of the freezer and ask a refrigeration tech to

work on the defrost cycle so the freezer doesn't need to heat up and then refreeze its air so often.

**3. Plastic film to wrap packages.** We know of no alternative because no one manufactures film made from other sources. But when one appears, we will start using it.

**4. Use of fuel to get to market.** Make half our annual trips in the car rather than the truck, saving nearly six gallons of fuel each trip, a reduction of more than half.

# Please help us decide how to restructure CSA

Three trends are pressuring us to change the structure of our Community Supported Agriculture project, but we want to hear from sharers, current and potential, before we make any change.

The rising cost of Turkey feed means we have to raise prices on our products (see page 6). The slow decline in the value of the American dollar is pushing that cost even higher, since our feed is milled in Quebec, and the

continued low inflation in our economy means the interest we pay on our shares is way above market.

We can mitigate the price increase set for May 1 a bit if we lower the interest that we pay to CSA sharers. We have been paying from 6 to 14 percent on shares, giving sharers their interest in Turkey items. The greater the investment in the share, the greater the interest.

Those numbers were not out of whack when we began offering interest. Now, they are.

We used to pay interest at the bank in the very low double digits. Now we pay about half that.

On the other hand, our average sharer draws \$109 in Turkey items for every \$100 she invests. That means that last year sharers collected nearly \$2,000 more in Turkey items than the face value of their shares.

If we paid less interest, or even no interest, on CSA shares, we could ease the impact of the price increase.

One possible course is to continue paying 6 percent interest on a \$100 share but to reduce the step increase to 1 percent from 2. Then, we would pay 7 percent on a \$150 share (instead of 8 percent) and 8 percent on a \$200 share (instead of 10 percent).

And so on.

That would set the interest on our largest share, \$300, at 10 percent. This would reduce the amount paid in interest by about 3 percentage points, we estimate, and would account for about 5 percent of the amount we must make up to cover higher feed prices.

A second course would be to lower the bottom interest rate of 6 percent to 4 percent or 5 percent and cut the incremental steps to 1 percent as well.

<b>The potential payouts</b>						
Share	Interest	Yield	Interest	Yield	Interest	Yield
\$100	4 %	\$104	5%	\$105	6%	\$106
150	5 %	157.50	6%	159	7%	160.50
200	6 %	212	7%	214	8%	216
250	7 %	267.50	8%	270	9%	272.50
300	8 %	324	9%	327	10%	330

This would account for 6 to 7 percent of the amount

we need to recoup higher feed prices.

Of course, there are many other possibilities.

If you are a sharer or want to be, let us know your preference, if any. We expect we decide by mid-May whether to change the CSA structure on June 1.

<b>Current payout</b>		
Share	Interest	Yield
\$100	6 %	\$106
150	8 %	162

Any share begun or renewed before

June 1 will be paid interest at the current rates (see box).

All paid sharers receive Turkey to the value of their interest-added share. The share lasts for a year and can be renewed any time.

Some people prefer to work for the farm rather than to sending a check for a CSA share.

For two days of work for the farm, sharers receive a \$150 share plus the interest that we pay on that share. Work sharers may begin drawing Turkey from their share after one day of work. The interest is added after the second day.

Work sharers work side by side with our crew.

Last year, work sharers helped us prepare for the Fryeburg Fair and to put everything away after the fair. Others worked with us on vaccination, cultivation of pumpkins fed to Turkeys, meat production and construction of a canopy to protect some of our fair equipment from the weather.

If you're interested in a paid share or a work share but need more information, call Bob at 778-2889 or e-mail us at turkeyfarm@gwi.net.

If you're ready to jump in, just fill out the form below and send it to us with your check or work request.

**CSA Order Form** 213

Fill in and send to The Turkey Farm, 219 Mile Hill Road, New Sharon, Maine 4955:

**Please sign me up for a share in Community Supported Agriculture for:**

(circle) \$100    \$150    \$200    \$250    \$300

**Please sign me up for a work share in (circle) June July August September October**

Name \_\_\_\_\_

Address \_\_\_\_\_

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

Telephone \_\_\_\_\_ E-mail \_\_\_\_\_

**Recipe***Turkey breast cutlets  
with apples and cranberries*

4 Tbsp.	butter
1/2	small onion, chopped
2	tart apples, thinly sliced
1/2 cup	fresh cranberries (or 1/4 cup sweetened dried)
1 lb.	Turkey breast cutlets
1/2 tsp.	salt
1/2 tsp.	black pepper
3/4 cup	cider (omit if using sweetened cranberries)
1/6 tsp	ground or rubbed sage

In a large skillet over high heat, melt 2 tablespoons of butter. Add onions and apples and cook, stirring frequently, until the apples are browned and slightly softened, about 5 minutes. Stir in the cranberries and cook until warmed through, about 1 minute. Transfer to a platter and keep warm.

Reduce heat to medium high and add 1 tablespoon of butter to the skillet. Sprinkle salt and pepper over the cutlets and brown them on both sides in the skillet, a total of 4 to 5 minutes. Transfer cutlets to a platter, cover and keep warm.

Return the apple mixture to the skillet and add the cider and sage. Bring to a boil over high heat until the liquid is reduced by about half, 2 to 3 minutes. Then swirl in the remaining tablespoon of butter.

Pour the sauce over the cutlets and serve immediately.

Serves four.

*Adapted from New American Cooking, Chuck Williams, ed.*

*Submitted by John McKee, Brunswick*

**Prices going up, again!**

Our most recent feed delivery, on April 8, brought more bad news. Feed for which we had paid an average of \$364.93 an international tonne last season cost \$488.50. We see little likelihood that this trend won't continue.

We expect to use about 100 tonnes of feed this year, so the increase means a rise in costs of \$12,357 for the year. Spread that over 2,000 Turkeys, and we have to generate more than \$6 more per Turkey just to stay even with our costs of 2010.

So, for the third time in a year, we must raise prices. The new price structure will take place on May 1, and will be in place for the first outdoor market at Crystal Spring Farm in Brunswick. We expect the price increases to be on the order of 7 to 10 percent.

This increase continues the trend that started in 2008 and has meant more than a doubling in feed prices since the end of the 2007 season.

The poultry trade press is reporting medium-sized processors in difficulty and large ones expecting to hit red ink soon because of the rising feed prices.

The trade press pins most of the responsibility on the congressional mandate requiring 10 percent of all gasoline be ethanol. Most ethanol-producing countries use plants such as switch grass and palm leaves to produce ethanol, but the United States uses food-grade corn, which reduces the supply available for human and animal consumption.

Up to 60 percent of our feed grain is corn, and Congress was already subsidizing corn growers directly before it tossed them the bone of an ethanol mandate.

Despite the rising prices, we hope you can continue to buy our fine Turkey items.

Thank you for understanding.

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please forward