

The Turkey Times

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Decisions, decisions characterize our year on the farm

By Bob Neal

Every day for a small business owner is decision day, every year an unbroken string of decisions.

For The Turkey Farm, 2008 was a year of frequent and unusually important decisions. During the season just completed, we had to decide, quickly, how to respond to the cost increases that were hitting small farms. We also had to make tougher personnel decisions than usual. And, as a result of those decisions, we had to decide at what level of activity to operate the farm, for 2008 and into the short-term and long-term future.

COST INCREASES

Regular customers must be tired of hearing about our cost increases. But those increases lie at the very base of the farm's operation and even its existence. In two years, feed, diesel fuel (truck and tractor), propane (plant and brooder house) and supplies (shavings for litter, etc.) all doubled or more, although fuel prices have receded.

Two-thirds of the money we put into a Turkey is for feed, so a doubling of feed prices raises our cost by two-thirds.

While the huge poultry producers dug deeper into their pockets and took heavy losses to keep their market shares — one huge broiler company went under while others closed packing plants all over the country — small farmers had to cover rising costs or find something else to do.

Our choices were whether to raise prices to cover these costs, whether to take a loss and keep prices steady or whether to discontinue our least profit-

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able activities (wholesaling frozen items to stores, our farm store, fresh Turkeys at Christmas, etc.) to lessen the impact of the cost increases. And, we had to decide whether to continue to use feed with



no genetically modified grains, for which we pay a premium of 9 to 13 percent.

Our decision: We combined these choices to minimize the effects of rising costs. First, we raised prices. Second, we absorbed some cost increases. Third, we changed our feeding pattern to try to reduce feed consumption a bit without walking away from gmo-free feed

This was the first time we raised prices twice in a season.

The increases, on May 1 and again on Sept. 1, amounted to about 10 percent on frozen items and about 17 percent

on fresh whole Turkeys. The result was that a whole Turkey for which we charged \$2.65 a pound in 2007 cost \$3.09 a pound in 2008. Turkey breast cutlets that cost \$7.15 a pound in 2007 cost \$7.80 now, the ground Turkey that was \$4.25 is now \$5.25. And so on.

This followed a significant price increase in 2007, and puts our prices about 30 per cent higher than at the end of 2006. We were pretty certain that raising prices would drive away customers.

It did.

Sales at our farm store dropped by 20 percent. Cash sales at the Brunswick farmers market fell by 12 percent, or about \$100 a week, but increased subscription to Community Supported Agriculture offset some of the lost sales. Total items moved (at the higher prices) declined by 26 percent.

Frozen items sold wholesale to stores fell by 1 percent for accounts served throughout both years. Item sales dropped by more than 14 percent.

Sales at the Fryeburg Fair, where we had to raise the price of a full dinner to \$13, fell by nearly 10 percent, but some of that can be attributed to the rain that washed out opening day, usually our third-busiest day of the show.

At Thanksgiving, and we sold the 1,400 Turkeys we had allocated for that holiday, despite the price increases.

Still, we had more cancellations of Thanksgiving orders in 2008 than in 2005-07 combined. And of more than 50 callers who asked first about price, not one ordered a Turkey from us in

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Prices, personnel decisions dominate the farm's year

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2008. Usually, about half the people whose first question is about price wind up ordering a holiday Turkey from us.

The number of Turkeys sold at Christmas fell, by 14 percent each at retail and wholesale.

The amount of the cost increase that we absorbed left us scratching at the end of the season to break even. We did a little better than that, but we will certainly have to dip into our line of credit earlier in 2009 than in other years.

We changed our feeding practice from 24/7 free choice to restricted feeding. Instead of filling every feed box to the brim, we waited for each box to empty,

then gave the birds a couple of hours to clean up around it — Turkeys are sloppy eaters — before refilling it.

This meant that every feed was empty for several hours a week,

which reduced the amount of feed available. The growth of almost all of our Turkeys was not affected, but the alpha toms, those that usually grow to 32-36 pounds, finished in the high 20s this year.

We have orders every year for about 30 Turkeys of 32 pounds or more, and those customers had to take birds that were 27-29 pounds. On our balance sheet, that meant \$15-\$22 less income on each of those 30 birds.

We cannot be certain that restricted feed slowed the heaviest birds because October and November, when Turkeys gain weight fastest, were very rainy, and Turkeys eat less in the rain. Most likely, a combination of restricted feed and weather skinned out our heavy toms.

PERSONNEL

Nothing changed the character of the farm this season more than the need to find all-new crew. (See also Page 4.)

We began the season with farm manager Elaine Stevens as our linchpin employee. At Elaine's urging, we had de-

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ecided to build up the farm, so we added two 30-hour-a-week positions in May with the intention of adding another in late summer or early autumn.

But on May 1, Elaine gave notice that she was leaving the farm, just as we were beginning to interview people for the other two positions. Elaine finished on July 30.

The decisions we faced were whether to try to replace Elaine with a new hire, untested at running the farm; whether to scale back for this year; and whether to hire additional people to make up for her experience and energy.

The decision: We hired three people, one full-time and two part-time, and as owner I took on the job of managing the farm.

Linda Chapman, who lives in Starks, became our cook and weekend storekeeper and by now has made more Turkey pies than she ever knew could exist. She also helped us a great deal with such farm activities as vaccination, feeding and slaughter. Linda turned away from a veterinary career plan when her family came along, and it's a shame because she has terrific animal sense, which she exercises these days by keeping horses at her small farm and working also on a sheep farm.

Tyler Paine, a Marine Corps veteran of the fighting in Iraq, joined us in August and was a reliable farmhand who juggled his work here with studies at Central Maine Community College, with preparing to become a father later this month and with the tasks of home ownership. Tyler, in true Marine fashion, always volunteered for the least desirable task, whether it was feeding Turkeys in the rain or mucking out the brooder.

Karen Cram came to us from Olympia Sports, where she had managed several stores, most recently in Farmington. She brought organizing skill, the ability to see several steps ahead and no farm experience, probably a great resume for working on this farm. Karen worked full-time this fall while Linda and Tyler worked 30 hours most weeks.

Come spring we will gear up again and hope one or more of these workers will want to come back.

In anticipation of lowered demand for frozen items and Christmas birds, we also reduced our flock for the season. For the July 17 hatch, we cut our order of 800 poults to 550, and ended the season with about the same number of birds in the freezer as we had had at the end of 2007.

We expect that these birds will get us into June before we slaughter again.

DECISIONS FUTURE

During the next few months, we need to decide the two-to-five-year future of the farm. We waffled this decision last spring after Elaine gave notice.

We believe the long-term future of the farm is more secure than the short-term, but both depend way too much on the national economy and on national and state regulation, which is likely to become more invasive in the near future.

We need to decide soon whether to reduce the 2009 flock so we don't over-produce for the markets we have developed.

We also need to decide whether to maintain our commitment to genetically clean feed, and to try to calculate how this decision might affect our sales.

Finally, we need to decide the future of the farm out beyond two to five years. Elaine was correct that it will be easier to sell the farm as a going concern. But it is also more difficult each year to maintain the level of the previous year. As my wife Marilyn has said, "After all these years, farming should be getting easier. But it's not. It's getting harder." We must decide how much we can commit to harder work each year just to stay even.

We live in interesting times. Stay tuned.

Memberships rise in Community Supported Agriculture

One bright spot in the 2008 season was the increase, especially among Brunswick customers, in the number of people who participated in our Community Supported Agriculture.

For about a month, we had 102 CSA members, but that number fell as a few people drew down their shares and did not renew.

Over the year, 45 people bought shares at the farmers market in Brunswick. Nine sharers who had bought shares in 2007 completed their shares and did not renew.

At the farm, 51 people bought shares in 2008 and four others finished up earlier shares but did not renew.

The total of 96 is the most shares sold in a year since we became Maine's second CSA in 1990.

People who buy into CSA help themselves as well as the farm. They draw interest in the form of items from our product line. And they contribute to the continuing effort to revivify Maine's farm economy.

| Share Yields | | |
|--------------|----------|-------|
| Share Yield | Interest | |
| \$100 | 6 % | \$106 |
| 150 | 8 % | |
| 162 | | |
| 200 | 10 % | |
| 220 | | |
| 250 | 12 % | |

They also get to know the farmer from whom they get Turkey, and they can place special orders, recommend new items or pass on ideas about how we can improve.

A number of good ideas have come from sharers. Most recently, we got ideas from sharers on flavoring our garlic lovers' sausage, and the sausage is better for the ideas we adopted.

In the past, sharers gave us lots of information about genetically modified crops, which helped convince us to avoid genetic modification wherever we could.

CSA sharers, especially those who buy in before the season begins, also help the farm by providing us cash upfront.

We begin this year with far less cash on hand than in the past few seasons. Thus, we plan to use the early CSA proceeds to offset the cost of buying baby Turkeys and feed, so we can put off the

Learn about CSA upfront and personal

If you want to learn more about CSA at our farm and others, The Turkey Farm will participate in two of 11 CSA fairs being held on Feb. 8 around the state.

We will have tastings and information at Farmington and at Brunswick.

Both CSA fairs are open from 1 to 4 p.m. on Sunday, Feb. 8. The Farmington fair will be at the Fairbanks Meeting House, 508 Fairbanks Road (Routes 4 & 27). The Brunswick CSA Fair is at St. Paul's Episcopal Church, 27 Pleasant St.

date when we begin drawing on our bank line of credit.

If feed prices decline and if we decide on a set of projects to complete this year, which will be set out in the April issue of The Turkey Times, we may divert some of the early CSA proceeds to developing those projects.

Ours is a draw-down or debit CSA. People buy a share, and we add the interest for that level of share. The sharers then draw against that amount

Shares are available, in increments of \$50, from \$100 to \$400.

Sharers may renew at any time. A share that isn't used up expires after a year. An expired share can be renewed after expiry, and we will roll the unused amount into the new share.

Members may draw on their shares any time. Our farm store on Route 27 in New Sharon is open from 2 to 6 p.m. on Wednesday and Friday and from 10 a.m. to 2 p.m. on Saturday. It

is also open by chance, and we are in the plant every day. If you're coming from a distance, it is best to call ahead to make sure we're there when you arrive.

Sharers may also visit us at the Brunswick Farmers Market.

Through the winter, we will sell at the Fort Andross winter market on the second and fourth Saturdays of each month: Jan. 24, Feb. 14, Feb. 28, March 14, March 28, April 11 and April 25. The market is open from 9 a.m. until noon.

On May 2, we'll return to the Crystal Spring Farmers Market on the Pleasant Hill Road. That market is open from 8:30 to 12:30 p.m. May 2 through Oct. 31.

We also make frequent deliveries and can take orders to sharers on one of those trips.

To join our CSA, fill out the form below and send it with your check. Your membership begins when we receive your check.

CSA Order Form

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Fill out and send to The Turkey Farm, 219 Mile Hill Road, New Sharon, Maine 04955.

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

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

Name _____

Address _____

Town _____ State _____ Zip _____

Telephone _____ E-mail _____

Three sad farewells to three mainstays of our farm

In addition to difficult business conditions, 2008 was a year of sad departures from The Turkey Farm.

We lost three mainstays, and none will be easy to replace.

Farm manager Elaine Stevens, who had worked here since 1999 and had managed the farm since 2004, left on July 30. She is looking for a career change.

For more than five years, we had been able to trust the entire farming operation to Elaine, knowing that the Turkeys would be well cared for and that tasks would be done well and on time.

Our young birds in the brooder house were always clean as Elaine made sure we

changed litter frequently. The electric fences that protect our birds from predators were up and running every minute we had birds on range. The feed boxes were never empty, the drinking fountains never dry.

Elaine worked hard to maintain the quality of our soil and soil substructure through rotational pasturing and planting of perennial grasses.

A great deal of what the farm has become can be credited directly to Elaine's presence for most of the past 15 years.

Before coming back to the farm — Elaine had worked here casually from

1993 to 1997 — she also ran her own herb and vegetable farm. She is a gifted farmer and was devoted to this farm.

Our illustrator, Robbie Neal, has hung up his ink pen.

Robbie, who grew up on The Turkey Farm, has decided to move away from the world of deadlines and into other art projects. He lives in Portland and works as a survey researcher.

While The Turkey Times will no longer be built around his drawings, you'll continue to see Robbie's work on our label, and we may drag out appropriate past drawings on occasion.

Our logo, The Versatile Turkey, was lifted from a mural that Robbie painted in 1998 for our farm store and for our stand at the Fryeburg Fair.

For the time being, we will use canned art in The Turkey Times.

Hannah Sprague, who helped us at our farmers market stand in Brunswick, has also called it quits. Hannah will graduate in the spring from Brunswick High School, and she wants to be free during the spring and summer to pursue post-graduation activities, perhaps including full-time work to begin to offset the high cost of college.

We are looking for a Brunswicker to help us at market beginning May 2.

Elaine, Robbie and Hannah all contributed mightily to the success of The Turkey Farm.

We wish them only the best.

Recipe

Winter stew with smoked kielbasa

| | |
|----------------|--|
| 1/2 lb. | smoked Turkey kielbasa |
| 2-4 large | potatoes, skin on, cut into spoon-size pieces |
| 1/2 small head | cabbage, shredded coarsely |
| 2-4 medium | sweet potatoes, cut into spoon-size pieces |
| 1-2 medium | onions, sliced |
| 1/4-1/2 lb. | kale leaves without stems, shredded (optional) |
| 1 small | rutabaga, cut into spoon-size pieces |
| 2 tbsp. | butter |

Slice kielbasa thinly. In a stock pot or large sauce pan, melt butter over low to moderate heat and braise kielbasa slices briefly. Fill pot to one-third with hot water and bring to a boil. Add vegetables and bring back to boil. Reduce heat and simmer for an hour. Season to taste. Serve hot with toast or thick-sliced bread. Makes 4 servings and plenty for tomorrow, too.

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please forward