



MICHIGAN SOYBEAN PROMOTION COMMITTEE

a new release



FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE
July 31, 2009

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Michigan family feeds people, economy with egg farm

For the Vande Bundtes, farming is more than an income. It's more than a way of life. To brothers Tim and Paul Vande Bunte and their mother, Alida, farming nourishes people's basic need for food. The Martin, Michigan, egg farmers see themselves in important roles feeding the hungry, boosting the local economy—in a significant way—and giving back to the community.

They even named their farm, Konos, Inc., for this concept. The word *konos* comes from a Greek Biblical word meaning to serve with a willing spirit.

The cholesterol scare of the 1980s and '90s left the poultry industry reeling when people believed that eggs were bad for them. U.S. per capita egg consumption reached a low point in 1991, but now that consumers have more complete nutrition information, egg consumption is rising.

"We weathered the hard times of the '80s and early '90s when the cholesterol scare eliminated so many egg producers nationally," Tim Vande Bunte said. "Because of this, Paul and I learned the hard lessons that hard times teach."

Getting safe, economical eggs to market is a guiding principle for the brothers. According to Paul Vande Bunte, "We have found that when we stand on our principles, the money follows."

The egg business has been successful enough for the family that Konos is able to employ about 75 employees, with 45 to 50 working full-time. "We donate 10 percent of our gross profits to church and charity," Tim added, "in addition to donating to numerous food banks and community pantries." Besides jobs and giving, the local economy benefits big in other ways, too.

The Vande Buntzes prefer to boost other farmers with their purchases of inputs. "We definitely attempt to buy locally when we can," Paul said. "We believe in keeping agricultural dollars in Michigan."

As a result, agriculture is vital to the economy in the Allegan County area. "Agriculture—food production—is stable and consistent," Tim explained. "There is always a market there. People have to eat."

Paul said the community feels the positive impact. "It pays property taxes and provides jobs," he said of the industry.

One way the brothers stimulate Michigan's economy is through their purchase of local soybean meal, the protein of choice for most poultry producers and a significant portion of the birds' diets. The Vande Buntzes' 1.3 million laying hens consume 7,800 tons of soy meal annually, "which puts \$2.7 million into the Michigan economy per year from soybean meal alone," Tim said.

“We rely on soybean meal a lot,” he said. “It is the effective and crucial part of our feed formula.”

Soybean meal is part of what fuels the family’s hens to lay 900,000 to 1 million eggs per day. Eggs are not only sold locally in West Michigan, but also shipped to both coasts. Markets include Detroit, Chicago, Los Angeles, and New York.

The brothers even support local agriculture with the chicken litter, which is sold as fertilizer to area grain farmers. “It’s the ultimate recycling process for us,” Tim said.

The Vande Bunte family began the farm in 1946 with 10,000 chickens, and moved to the current location in 1971. Tim’s and Paul’s father passed his share of the business to his sons, who continued to farm after graduating from Hope College.

They believe that farming together as family, along with their mother, is also good for business. “We can talk things through and make good decisions because we wear so many hats—farmer, electrician, counselor, and so on,” Paul said.

The family believes they’ve made good decisions when it comes to protecting the environment. They follow a Comprehensive Nutrient Management Plan to handle manure and other wastes, and they voluntarily entered into a state program that assures their farm’s practices as environmentally sound. Konos achieved verification with the program, known as the Michigan Agriculture Environmental Assurance Program.

“People need to know that we drink the water, too,” Paul said of the farm’s concern for environmental responsibility. “We really do want what’s best for everybody.”

To Paul and Tim, taking good care of their chickens is a top priority. They seek to find the optimal balance between providing cages of adequate size and providing so much room that the birds are actually hurt. “When given too much room, the birds will destroy each other,” Tim explained of their pecking-order behavior, “so we follow principles that are better for the birds even if they don’t match the emotions coming from the animal welfare folks.”

The farm is United Egg Producers Certified, which ensures humane standards for the comfort, health, and safety of their chickens.

Feeding hungry people—1.4 million of them per year, based on the family’s egg production and current U.S. per capita consumption of 254 eggs annually—continues to guide the Vande Bunte family in their daily work. “I truly believe in what I do,” Tim said. “I don’t go to work, I go to fun. There’s great satisfaction in being in an industry that performs a crucial service to people. Because food is not a want, it’s a need.”

The Michigan Soybean Promotion Committee works to enhance the profitability of Michigan’s soybean producers through investment of soybean checkoff funds. MSPC works to build markets for soybeans through educational programs, promotion of biodiesel and other new soybean uses, and funding agronomic research. MSPC is led by a board of farmers elected to direct the investment of soybean checkoff funds on behalf of the more than 10,000 Michigan soybean farmers. For information about soybean checkoff results, call (989) 652-3294 or visit www.michigansoybean.org. To learn more about good stewardship practices and the connection between crop production and animal agriculture, visit www.animalag.org.