



## MICHIGAN SOYBEAN PROMOTION COMMITTEE

# a new release



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### **Michigan farmer provides turkeys to fill consumers' growing demand for healthy meat**

Once saved for holiday meals, turkey has become a pantry staple for many who appreciate its low fat and high protein content. In turn, Americans are gobbling up twice as much turkey per person as in the 1970s. Harold Walcott of Allendale, Michigan, is a 68-year-old farmer who's making sure there are plenty of the gobblers to go around.

Walcott is one of 16 family farmers who own and direct the Michigan Turkey Producers Co-op. Major poultry processors in the state closed down in the late 1990s, leaving the farmers with no market for turkeys. They banded together to take matters into their own hands, forming the cooperative a decade ago. Together, these farmers produce 96 percent of the turkeys in the state, or 4.6 million birds. Of those, more than 40 percent are raised by Walcott at one of 13 locations in Ottawa County and one in northwest Ohio.

According to the National Turkey Federation, U.S. consumption of turkey is 17.5 pounds per capita, up from 8.1 pounds in 1970.

Turkey is something worth gobbling about for Michigan's economy. Each turkey may be small—a market-ready tom may weigh in at about 36 to 40 pounds—but together they make a significant impact.

Walcott's 1.9 million turkeys each year provide full-time incomes for 60 to 65 employees. "We're making a healthy product while making a living ourselves," said flock supervisor Rick Van Rhee, who has worked for Walcott for 22 years.

"The biggest impact of the turkey industry is job growth for the economy," said Jason Hitchcock, a 15-year employee who manages the feed mill for Walcott's farms. "The industry has grown and is growing. It provides a lot of jobs, and it's a very healthy product." Hitchcock estimates the turkey business has added 1,000 to 1,200 jobs to the community.

According to Michigan Turkey Producers Co-op CEO Dan Lennon, the total economic impact weighs in at about \$90 million for Michigan each year, with \$15 million in wages and salaries for Michigan workers.

Turkeys have an impact on other segments of Michigan agriculture as well. They depend on soybeans and corn for their diets, with soybean meal being the prime protein. "Soybean meal is the number-one choice," Walcott said. The soybean meal makes up 25 percent of a turkey's diet.

Surprisingly, poultry eat more soybean meal than any other group of animals. Turkeys use 7.4 percent of the soybean meal consumed in Michigan.

Walcott and his employees are careful about the turkeys' diets, just as they're careful about how they treat the birds along the way. Tom turkeys are purchased locally, at just one day old. Throughout their lives, details such as proper ventilation and clean water make for healthy birds.

Van Rhee said when the turkey farmers' cooperative truck arrives at member farms to pick up birds, automated turkey loaders are used. The loaders are designed to prevent bruising and avoid human handling that can stress the birds on their way into the truck. The birds ride on conveyors into the truck, then step off once in the cages as the belt retracts. Once they've reached the processing plant, cages are gently unloaded. Birds are conveyed to a room where they are humanely euthanized with a gas that puts them to sleep.

"Our production practices are done as humanely as possible," Hitchcock said.

Walcott has been in the turkey business for 45 years, and his careful practices spread into other facets of his farms. Nine of Walcott's farm locations are environmentally verified as part of the voluntary Michigan Agriculture Environmental Assurance Program. Taking good care of turkeys and the land is just part of what makes Walcott and his employees successful at providing such a large portion of Michigan turkeys. Hitchcock explained, "We try to be the absolutely best neighbors we can. From the cleanliness of the farm, to federal regulatory programs, to manure handling facilities, we try to be as environmentally aware as possible."

Now that's something to gobble about.

The Michigan Soybean Promotion Committee works to enhance the profitability of Michigan's soybean producers through the 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](http://www.michigansoybean.org). To learn more about good stewardship practices and the connection between crop production and animal agriculture, visit [www.animalag.org](http://www.animalag.org).