

What Happened to all the Kansas-Grown Turkeys?

Kansas ranks around 20th in the number of turkeys raised compared to other states. That doesn't seem too bad until you realize that 20th is still far less than 1 percent of all the 235 million turkeys grown in the United States each year. The leading states are Minnesota, North Carolina and Arkansas, according to data from the Economic Research Service of the U.S. Department of Agriculture.

At one time, Kansas was considered by many in the poultry industry to be second in total poultry production, said Kansas State University animal scientist, Scott Beyer. In the 1930s about 10 percent of all Kansas farms raised turkeys. In the 1940s, live and dressed turkey competitions were held in Wichita.

Many of the birds were hatched in the state and grown in fields with protection by pole barns, said Beyer, who is a poultry specialist with K-State Research and Extension. If Kansans wanted a turkey grown in the state, in the early 1960s that was about the best time to find one.

In the '70s and '80s, big changes came to the state and national turkey industries. Turkey growers became larger and fewer, Beyer said. Many people saw similar changes in livestock production so to protect small farms, legislation was passed to slow the change to marketing alliances where turkey growers produced birds under contract.

As the turkey industry grew enormously in other states, he said, Kansas turkey growers lost the competitive edge they had as the industry modernized into integrated production models.

"Ironically, the model for integrated turkey production used today has saved many family farms by growing turkeys on contract – but in other states, not Kansas," Beyer said. "Farms, feed mills, hatcheries, and processing plants once in Kansas were all closed and built in other states. And the jobs and farm diversification went with them."

Other factors like market proximity and transportation over sparse farm roads were no doubt contributing factors, but the very regulations meant to save the farm actually closed many of the turkey farms in Kansas.

By the early 1980s, virtually no turkeys were grown in Kansas, Beyer added. Even the Central Kansas Hatchery, which at one time hatched 2 million to 3 million day-old-poults a year, shipped their turkeys to neighboring states. But the cost of moving all of those turkeys to other states for feeding and processing became too much and that hatchery closed as well.

In the late 1980s, a few commercial turkey farms, built to grow turkeys under contract with a large integrated turkey producer, opened in Cherokee County in southeast Kansas. Other large farms soon followed in the same area and a feed mill was constructed. The turkeys grown in that area today are processed across the state line in Missouri.

"Kansas remains a potential state for significant turkey production," Beyer said. "There are a small number of growers in Kansas that produce heritage breed turkeys and some are marketed nationally. With good roads, a strong agricultural base, and feed resources, the turkey industry could one day look to Kansas to grow birds again."

Because the industry has become ensconced in other states, Beyer said, it would take a sustained and concerted effort by local farm groups, cities, counties and the state to show that Kansas should be considered when new growth occurs in the turkey industry.

“Perhaps rural areas in need of new jobs and business would see turkey production as a way to diversify farming and brings new jobs to Kansas,” he said.