Title

The Never-Ending Labeling Controversy: Turkey Production in Minnesota

Objectives

The target of this paper is to understand the policy and politics behind food labeling regulations, specifically pertaining to the turkey industry. The primary objective is to have the reader recognize influences of labeling mechanisms in the production of turkey in Minnesota. Inadvertently, the reader will come to understand the common practices of commercial turkey production and alternative ways of turkey production such as raised antibiotic free, open range turkey production.

Summary of Findings

Labeling

Background on Labeling

The consumers’ primary selection of food quality comes from visual cues, yet food products have a large amount of hidden components that cannot be seen by the naked eye (Vileisis 53). Food labeling can be as direct as the list of ingredients found in the product and as complicated as distinguishing the labor practices surrounding the harvesting of those ingredients. American society should use food labels to reveal these hidden components of the food industry.

Health Labeling

An essential facet to food labels is to protect the health of the consumer. Food labeling not only ensures the safety of consumers with food allergies but recently labeling has tried to satisfy the rise of American’s concern to eat right in order to live longer healthy lives. One component to that healthy life is avoiding harmful bacteria found mostly in meat products. Since 1993, the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) requires “safe handling” labels for packaged meat, including turkey, to ensure the health of consumers (Nestle, Safe Foods 104). The safe handling labels educate the consumer on how to prepare the meat to ensure the safety of the consumers. Meat producers were unhappy with this new regulation because of the possibility of production loss from consumers misinterpreting the label to thinking all meat was unsafe. Therefore, lobbyists for the meat industry pushed certain size regulations and included confusing language on the label (See Appendix A for an example of a safe-handling label) (Morgan, Marsden, and Murdoch 91).
Labeling and Marketing

The food label is also used as a marketing strategy. The problem of labeling being mixed with marketing is that the producer wants to entice the consumer to purchase their product by using attractive and often exaggerating wordage to enhance their products. For instance, suppose marketing teams found that when the word “natural” was on a product’s label more products were sold. Intuitively, more companies would start writing natural on their labels. Yet that defeats the purpose for the consumer who assumes they are buying a natural product. Since the legitimacy of writing these words via the honor system did not satisfy all customers’ concerns, specific symbols associated with designated practices emerged to give reassurance to the consumer (Nestle, What to Eat 172). An example of this symbol is the “certified organic” label specified by the USDA (See Appendix B). However, a problem with “certified organic” is that the process requires time and money. All farmers do not have access to the money and technological processes needed to switch to organics. Other problems with food labels is it is hard to determine who is saying what and determining how closely regulated the label should be.

Background on Minnesota Turkey Production

In 2011, Minnesota turkey farmers generated 46,500 million heads of turkey. This makes Minnesota the leading producer of turkeys in the country. North Carolina was the second leading state with 32,000 million heads of turkey (See Appendix C). Turkeys’ diets are composed mostly of corn and grains, which is grown in abundance in the Midwest. Thus, transportation of turkey feed is quite low in Minnesota and some turkey farmers even grow their own feed which further reduces the production costs. Heating costs are higher in Minnesota but even with this drawback, Minnesota comes out ahead. This makes Minnesota prime turkey production ground.

Turkeys and Labeling

What should you look for on a turkey label? In order to answer that question it is important to understand the practices that go into turkey production. The following sections will address this component for the reader. It is essential to know what type of turkey you are consuming and what practices are used on the turkeys when you eat commercial turkey as opposed to open-range turkey or even organic turkey. Similarly, it is important to understand the health risks involved in turkey consumption. Surprisingly, the USDA has a lot fewer regulations on different bacteria testing in the turkey industry such as Salmonella (See Nicole Johnson’s paper for more information on diseases and antibiotics used on turkeys) testing compared to the other meat industries. A newspaper report addressing the lack of testing stated that, “[n]early two years after the government mandated ‘Pathogen Reduction and HACCP’’s program was started, the USDA’s Food Safety and Inspection Service is tied up in knots with bureaucratic red tape” (“USDA Should Stop Giving Turkey Industry ‘Holiday’ From Bacteria Testing”). When it comes to turkey and food labeling the more you understand about the practices of the industry the more confident you can be with your purchases.
**Commercial Turkey Production**

*Environment on the Farm*

Prior to the 1960s most commercial turkeys ran free range, however turkey farmers slowly began to move their birds into grow-out houses that look a lot like broiler houses (See Appendix D for diagram). “Houses require less labor than range grow-out, they facilitate and encourage year-round production, and they enable the grower to raise more broods per year” (Hart 172). Wild turkeys are discriminating eaters. That is they search for particular food such as insects, grass, and seeds. This diet does not produce the gigantic birds that supermarket consumers and commercial breeders prefer, so when the bird is about five days old, the farmer snips off approximately one-third of the bird’s upper beak without anesthesia using a red-hot blade (Blatt 128). Additionally, the turkeys’ toenails are clipped to prevent turkeys from pecking at neighboring turkeys’ feathers and even cannibalism in extremely crowded commercial productions. This “debeaking” process transforms the turkeys’ mouth into a shovel forcing turkeys to devour the farmers’ protein-rich, highly fortified, corn-based mash.

*The Turkey Life Cycle*

The poult, baby turkeys, spend about their first month in a brooder. A brooder is a heated barn where poult is given food and water and kept safe from disease; yet, they are restricted with hundreds of thousands of other poult. Once the turkeys grow feathers they are moved into the grow-out houses. The floors in grow-out houses are covered in wood shavings to collect turkey waste and the smell of ammonia burns the turkeys’ eyes. “The barns generally lack windows and are illuminated by bright lights 24 hours a day, keeping the turkeys awake and eating” (Blatt 129). These turkeys grow larger much faster than turkeys in their natural environment. As a result these turkeys are prone to bowlegs, hip disorders, and heart disease. Due to all of the de-shaping diseases turkeys are unable to mount so they cannot reproduce naturally. For that reason, the sole means of production is by artificial insemination.

*Slaughtering Practices*

Once the turkeys reach commercial weight, 12 to 60 pounds the turkeys are transported to the slaughterhouse where they are put upside down in shackles on the production line. The turkeys on the production line are dragged through an electrical charged water bath. “Turkey slaughter houses commonly set the electrical current lower than what is required to render the birds unconscious because of concern that too much electricity would damage the carcasses and diminish their value” (Blatt 129). Therefore, many turkeys are still conscious after the stunning tank. The next step in the production line is a mechanical blade that slits the turkeys’ throats. Often, the blade misses the turkey and in the next phase of the production line the turkeys are burned alive in scalding water which removes their feathers.
Modern Commercial Turkey Farming Trends

Tom Little from Elysian, Minnesota is a part-time turkey farmer who has been raising turkeys his whole life. Tom is continuing his grandfather’s turkey farm operation but unlike his grandfather Tom only raises adult turkeys. Because of Tom’s higher specialty level he is able to raise around 550,000 turkeys annually (Little). Tom is a contracted turkey farmer so a larger corporation contracts with Tom to raise the turkeys during the adult stage of their lives until they reach slaughtering weight and pays a corresponding fee. According to the USDA, “the increase in technology and mastery of turkey breeding has led to highly specialized operations. Each production process of the turkey industry is now mainly represented by various specialized operations” (“Overview of the U.S. Turkey Industry” 2). The agriculture sector has become much more compartmentalized as farmers strive to stay competitive in the capitalistic market.

Alternative Modes of Turkey Production
Raised Antibiotic-Free Open Range Turkey Production/Ferndale Market

The life of a Ferndale Market turkey from Cannon Falls, Minnesota is not the ordinary commercial farming experience. The turkeys sold at Ferndale Market are not bred there. They buy their poults when they are 3-5 days old. The poults are kept in a brooder barn however, unlike commercial farming practices each poult is given a certain square footage so the poult density is much smaller and the baby turkeys are able to move around more. Another difference about these brooder barns is that they keep small stones and pebbles in containers throughout the barn. Turkeys, in their natural habitat, often eat small stones and pebbles that they store in their gizzards. The rocks grind their food, which helps with the digestive process. Even though the poults are fed a finely grinded corn and grain feed they still instinctively want the rocks in their gizzards. At about 3-4 weeks the poults hit puberty and are moved to another barn that has both indoor and outdoor access. The turkeys at Ferndale Market are raised by gender that is to say the toms, male turkeys, are raised in one barn and the hens, female turkeys, are raised in another barn. Ferndale follows these separation guidelines mostly to provide the right amount of feed for each gender. Naturally, the toms consume more feed. Once the turkeys become adults they go to the open range where they no longer have access to a barn. Turkeys are naturally cluster birds so although they have access to a lot of space they clump up near their food supplies and portable sheds. The sheds act as roosting perches that allow the turkeys to perch at night attune to their wild relatives. Ferndale moves their sheds weekly so the turkeys are constantly grazing new grass. Once the turkeys are approximately 3 ½ months old, the farm contracts the slaughtering of their turkeys with a processing plant in Marshall, Minnesota. This plant prides itself on its perfect marks from third-party auditors on cleanliness and humaneness of their procedures (Peterson). The USDA labels turkeys from Ferndale Market as raised antibiotic free, open range turkeys.
Policy and Pricing Problems for the Middle Size Farmer

Ferndale Market is a middle sized, generationally handed down farm that produces 300,000 turkeys yearly. To put this number in perspective Ferndale Market produces about .05% of Minnesota’s turkeys. John Peterson, grandson to the founder of Ferndale, stated, “As a mid-size farm, we are a dying breed in the sense that we are highly under-represented in the government” (Peterson). John feels that the lobbyists that large farmers are able to fund coerce the government. Similarly, he feels that non-profits are solely advocating for the organic movement leaving his mid-size farm out to dry. So why doesn’t Ferndale Market make the switch to organic if they feel underrepresented in the government? About 70% of the production costs for raising turkeys derives from the feed costs (Brandenberger 58). This is the major obstacle keeping Ferndale Market from becoming an organic operation. Currently, they do not use certified organic feed, which is the only organic regulation the farm is not following. In a recent report by the president of the National Turkey Federation, Joel Brandenberger claims, “Higher feed costs and slow growth in the domestic economy are expected to keep production relatively flat for the foreseeable future” (58). At this time Ferndale Market does not think they can be competitive in the organic market because the demand at the corresponding price is not in existence yet. John feels the organic market is oversaturated for his size farm. However, Ferndale Market has an advantage over commercial turkeys because they do not contain antibiotics and they are open range which allows the turkeys to exercise more so Ferndale Market birds have leaner fat on their bones causing their turkeys to be healthier to consume. Therefore, Ferndale Market can price their turkeys higher than commercial turkeys but not as high as organics. It is still hard to market their product because of a lack of consumer understanding of what their product is and hence their unwillingness to pay the higher price. Ferndale’s largest consumer presently is Bon Appetit, the Carleton food service.

Conclusion

On average annually Americans eat 17 pounds of turkey (Nestle, What to Eat 141). There has been an increasing interest in non-commercial turkeys over the past decade such as the increase in organic turkey production rising from 750 in 1997 to 144,000 in 2005 (Blatt 130) (See Sources for more on organic turkeys). For the consumer to create a shift in the current paradigm of turkey consumption the consumer must become actively aware of the labeling procedures and politics. The consumer needs to realize what purpose the information is trying to provide for the consumer. Is it protecting the health and safety of the consumer? Or, is it trying to promote the sales of the turkey product? Further, the reader should challenge the government by demanding information that is currently missing from the label, The labels need to reflect the inhumane practices illustrated in the commercial farming section and the difference in quality between open-range, raised antibiotic free and organic turkeys. Without the demand for this information on the labels, the knowledge is lost. In order for Americans to take back control of the connection to the food supply we must make the food system transparent again.
Appendices

Appendix A
Safe Handling Instructions

Appendix B
USDA Organic Seal
Appendix C
Source—see sources

NUMBER OF TURKEYS RAISED, 2011
THOUSAND HEAD

U.S. Total: 249 Million Head

211 Million Head, 85% of U.S. Total
All Other States

U.S. Turkeys Raised
1961-2011

USDA/NASS
04/2012
Appendix D
Broiler/Commercial Turkey Houses
Source—See Sources
Sources


Little, Tom. Personal interview. 16 May 2012.


Peterson, John. Personal interview. 4 May. 2012.

