

CHAPTER 9

Processing and Marketing Regulations

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Processing Questions for the Producer

Processing is often one of the biggest challenges facing farmers that raise heritage turkeys. Locating a processor within your region is critical to your success. The independent poultry processor has become a scarce resource and farmers often find that they may have to travel hundreds of miles to find one that meets their needs. Most processing facilities in the United States are now owned and operated by large corporations and do not accept birds from sources other than their own contract farms.

Before committing to raising heritage turkeys, you need to answer two key questions:

1. Who are your customers?

- Family and friends?
- People residing within your state?
- People residing beyond your state borders?
- Restaurants or retailers?

2. How will you process the birds?

- On your own farm?
- At a processing plant?

Your market will determine the type of processor required. You will need to contact your state department of agriculture for requirements governing processing in your area. If you are selling in limited quantities to your neighbors you may be able to process the birds yourself. In many states, products processed on-farm can be distributed directly to individual consumers.

Selling to area restaurants and grocers require the processor to be state inspected, at a minimum. State inspected products can only be distributed within the state in which the bird was processed. If your marketing plans have you selling across state lines, the processor used must be federally inspected. Federal inspection, also known as USDA inspection, enables the broadest distribution of product. Product from a federally inspected plant may be shipped across state lines, as well as sold to wholesale buyers, retail outlets, and restaurants.

Working with a Processor

As with any business there are basic expectations and needs. Processors vary in the services they provide so it is important to know what you want. Don't be afraid to ask questions. Begin by knowing what should be expected of a processor. Processors should conduct their business as professionals. This means communicating effectively with their customers (namely, you) and keeping scheduled appointments. They should treat the birds in a humane manner and not keep the birds waiting too long or unsheltered before processing. The processed birds should be returned in good condition with little or no tearing of the skin. They should be cleanly plucked, though a few pinfeathers may remain even when processed by the most experienced processors. Remember, many heritage turkey varieties have dark pinfeathers which are more noticeable than those of white feathered turkeys. Finally, the processor must properly chill the dressed birds, package them, and label the product accurately.

Just as the farmers expect the processor to act professionally, the processor expects the same from the farmer. The processor expects farmers to make appointments prior to delivering birds for processing and to keep the appointments as scheduled. The plant will expect the birds to be humanely transported in containers that prevent escape while birds wait to be processed.

Discuss what options are available and determine whether these will serve your market needs. If you wish to keep giblets or any other parts of the turkey other than the processed carcass, arrange this in advance with the plant. Not all plants automatically include these parts with the finished product. If you prefer certain parts packaged separately, either in bulk or individually, discuss this with your processor as well.

Processing plants may use three different types of packaging. The simplest and least expensive is the plastic bag that fits loosely around the finished bird and is secured with a twist tie. The second packaging method is the vacuum pack. This process removes most of the air



Loading turkeys. Photo by Frank Reese.

and creates a nice seal around the product. The vacuum pack bags are a bit more expensive but reduce freezer burn and ice crystal buildup. The third and most expensive option is the cryopack. This packaging process removes all of the air and is form fitting to the product to create the best seal and protection for longer shelf life. Learn what packaging options are available from the plant and confirm your choice with the plant before delivering birds for processing.

There will be occasions when birds may be processed but returned in “less than whole” condition. This is usually by order of the inspector at the plant. Bruised wings or legs will be cut off and discarded; sections of breast meat may be removed due to damage from breast blisters, commonly associated with the heavier turkey varieties.

Labeling

Labels are regulated by USDA. Many processing plants have a standard label containing their name, address, and pertinent product information. If the farmer requires special labeling, it needs to be discussed with the processor and the plant’s USDA inspector before any investment is made in label development. Not all

processors are equipped to use custom labels. Custom labels may take months for approval by the USDA, so it is important to check with the plant manager and USDA inspector for expected timelines. It is crucial that it be understood by the producer that anything written on the labels needs to be absolutely true of the product and must be in language allowed under USDA regulation. The product cannot change and then continue to be processed with the same label. The producer is responsible for notifying the plant and the USDA inspector of changes in the product and making the appropriate alterations on the label prior to the arrival of birds for processing. Periodic testing of the finished products will be performed at the plant. If the USDA inspector finds that the product description is inaccurate, the producer may face serious federal charges and penalties.

As defined by USDA’s Food Safety and Inspection Service, after processing, birds can be chilled for storage and labeled as either “fresh,” “hard-chilled,” or “frozen.” In order for birds to be labeled “fresh,” they must never have been maintained below 26°F. Poultry that has been kept at temperatures between 26°F and 0°F must be labeled “hard-chilled” or “previously hard-chilled.” Poultry that has been kept at a temperature below 0°F must be labeled “frozen” or “previously frozen.”

Transporting Turkeys to the Processor

To reduce processing losses, handle your birds carefully, quietly, and humanely through their entire lives. Catch and crate them with as little stress and damage to the birds as possible. Birds being crated should have their heads upward and be put into the crate head first. As birds come out of the crates they should exit the crate head first.

Send only birds that are fit for transport. Do not send ill, fatigued, or injured birds to the processor. If the turkeys are handled carefully from beginning to end, processing losses due to injury will be significantly reduced. Producers may benefit from tracking trends if damage occurs regularly with their flocks. This will help to identify the cause of the damage and reduce future losses.

Many varieties of standard turkeys do have the ability to fly, so crates or carriers that prevent injury or loss should be used. Transport crates should have non-slip

flooring covered with absorbent litter, and have solid floors if crates are to be stacked, so that birds on the lowest levels do not become filthy with the feces of the birds stacked on top of them. If the crate bottoms are not solid, it may be useful to put cardboard or empty paper grain sacks between layers of crates to keep the lower level birds clean.

Crates must be both tall enough for the birds to sit and have enough floor space for each bird to rest comfortably. Typical turkey crates are approximately 40 inches long, 23 inches wide, and 16 inches tall and have room for six mature hens or three mature tom turkeys. Same-sex birds of approximately the same size should be crated together. Mixing males with females or small birds with large birds can result in injuries and undue stress during transport.

Crate doors must be large enough to easily insert and remove birds without injuring them. Ideally, crates should have both top and side access doors to facilitate injury-free crating and removal. The crates must be adequately ventilated, yet provide protection from the weather and wind generated by transportation. Birds should not be tightly packed. A mistake that many producers make is skimping on the number of crates they use. Although the initial investment in crates can be considerable, the crates will pay for themselves because there will be fewer injuries and transport losses over time.

Turkeys need to have air circulation while in transport. It is necessary that they be protected from exposure to cold temperatures or extreme heat, either of which



Turkeys on their way to the processor. Photo by Mike Walters.

can lead to death en route to the plant. Check the local weather forecast for unexpected weather extremes prior to loading birds. Dead or dying birds will be disposed of at the plant and the farmer will not be compensated for the loss.

Only healthy animals should be delivered to the plant. Birds that look sickly or have serious injuries will not be processed and will be destroyed with the loss taken by the farmer. In USDA- or state-inspected facilities, if a number of birds from a particular farm are found to be sick or in questionable condition, a government investigation of the farm will be ordered by the plant inspector.

Turkeys should be fasted for 8-12 hours, but no more than 24 hours, prior to delivery to minimize intestinal contents. This reduces the risk of bacterial contamination of the carcass caused by intestinal leakage during the evisceration process. The turkeys can and should have access to fresh water prior to shipment to the processing plant.

Since a fully loaded crate can weigh close to 100 pounds, owners need to make themselves available to assist processors in the unloading of the crated birds to prevent injury to man and bird alike.

Transporting Processed Turkeys

When picking up processed birds, bring your own coolers unless you have arranged to purchase shipping boxes from the plant ahead of time. According to government regulations, you cannot bring your own ice into a USDA-inspected plant for packing the finished product. You will need to either use ice provided by the plant (if it is available) or wait until you return to your vehicle before using your own ice to pack the processed birds.

In order to be properly stored, the birds should be at least maintained below 40°F. Fresh birds, if refrigerated properly, have a shelf-life of up to ten days. If frozen properly, below 0°F, the product can last up to six months.

Other Legal Considerations

Before selling processed poultry to the public, some states require producers to have a meat handlers license. You may also be required to carry product liability insurance if you are selling to the public. Other considerations to keep in mind are state requirements for permission to sell retail and for the collection of sales tax,

if applicable. You will need to check with your state department of agriculture to determine if you will need any or all of these items to sell your birds.

Resources

ATTRA, *Small Poultry Processing Plants and Services*, www.attra.ncat.org/attra-pub/poultry_processors_main.php, Appropriate Technology Transfer for Rural Areas (ATTRA) – National Sustainable Agriculture Information Service, PO Box 3657, Fayetteville, AR 72702, (800) 346-9140, fax (479) 442-9842, www.attra.ncat.org.

Appropriate Technology Transfer for Rural Areas (ATTRA), *Small Scale Poultry Processing*, Appropriate Technology Transfer for Rural Areas (ATTRA), www.attra.ncat.org/attra-pub/poultryprocess.html.

Berry, John, *Farmer's Guide to Processing Meat and Poultry*, www.lehigh.extension.psu.edu/Agriculture/Farmers_Guide.pdf, Pennsylvania State University, College of Agricultural Sciences, Lehigh County Cooperative Extension, 4184 Dorney Park Rd., Allentown, PA 18104, www.lehigh.extension.psu.edu

The Butcher Search, www.the-butcher-search.com/.

Consumer Policy Institute/Consumers Union, *The Consumers Union Guide to Environmental Labels*, www.eco-labels.org/labelIndex.cfm, Consumers Union, Dept. WJW, 101 Truman Ave., Yonkers, NY 10703-1057.

Hamre, Melvin L., *Home Processing of Poultry*, www.extension.umn.edu/distribution/livestocksystems/DI0701.html, University of Minnesota Extension Service, 1861 E US Highway 169, Grand Rapids, MN 55744-3396, (218) 327-5958.

Hipp, Janie, J.D., LL.M., *Legal Issues for Small-Scale Poultry Processors*, www.apppa.org/legalintro.pdf, The American Pastured Poultry Producers Association (APPPA), P.O. Box 73, Hartselle, AL 35640, (256) 751-3925, grit@apppa.org

Jacob, Dr. Jacqueline, *Directory of Custom Poultry Processors in Minnesota* www.ansci.umn.edu/poultry/resources/custom_processors_dir_march05.pdf, Dept. of Animal Science, University of Minnesota, 305 Haecker Hall, 1364 Eckles Ave., St. Paul, MN 55108, (612) 624-2722.

Mettler, John J., DVM, *Basic Butchering of Livestock and Game*, Storey Publishing, 1986.

Penner, Karen Pesares, et al., *A Food Safety Risk Management Guide for the Producer*, www.oznet.ksu.edu/library/fntr2/foodasyst/foodasysbook.pdf, Kansas State University Agricultural Experiment Station and Cooperative Extension Service, 7001 W 21 St. N, Wichita, KS 67205-1759, (316) 722-7721, fax (316) 722-7727.

Polson, Skip, *Poultry Processing Facilities Available for Use by Independent Producers in the Southern Region*, www.apppa.org/processors.pdf, American Pastured Poultry Producers Association, 36475 Norton Creek Rd, Blodgett, OR 97326, (541) 453-4557.

Roos, Debbie, *Sustainable Production: Grower Resource List*, www.chatham.ces.ncsu.edu/growingsmallfarms/poultrylist.html, North Carolina Cooperative Extension, P.O. Box 279, Pittsboro, NC 27312, (919) 542-8202, debbie_roos@ncsu.edu

Silverside, S. and Jones, M., *Small Scale Poultry Processing*, www.fao.org/docrep/003/t0561e/t0561e00.htm, Farm and Agriculture Organization (FAO) of the United Nations, Viale delle Terme di Caracalla, 00100 Rome, Italy, (+39) 06 57051, fax (+39) 06 570 53152, FAO-HQ@fao.org, www.fao.org.

USDA, Meat and Poultry Hotline (888) 674-6854 or for the hearing-impaired (TTY) (800) 256-7072.

United States Department of Agriculture, *Meat and Poultry Labeling Terms* www.fsis.usda.gov/oa/pubs/lablterm.htm.

United States Department of Agriculture, *USDA Regulations Governing Voluntary Grading of Poultry Products and Rabbit Products*, USDA, AMS, Poultry Programs, STOP 0259, Room 3944-South, 1400 Independence Avenue, SW, Washington, DC 20250-0259, (202) 720-3506, fax (202) 690-0941, www.ams.usda.gov/poultry/regulations/CFR70.doc

USDA or State Inspected Poultry Processing Plants Available for Custom Processing

Idaho

Janie Burns
Meadowlark Farm
9904 Southside Blvd.
Nampa, ID 83686
(208) 466-4806
State inspected.

Iowa

B & B Poultry Processing
Highway 60 South
Hospers, IA 51238
(712) 752-8251
Contact: Bob Muilenberg
State inspected. Will process chickens, ducks, and turkeys. Facility opened in 2006.

Kansas

Krehbiels Specialty Meats
1636 Mohawk Rd.
McPherson, KS 67460
(620) 241-0103
www.ksmi-meat.com
USDA inspected. Will process all types of poultry and livestock including ratites. Provides specialty processing such as grinding, sausage production, etc.

Kentucky

Kentucky State University Mobile Processing Unit (formerly run by Partners for Family Farms)
1525 Mills Lane
Frankfort, KY 40601
(502) 597-7501
Contact person: Steve Skelton
State-inspected mobile processing unit (MPU) available for rent to process chickens, and turkeys, as well as aquaculture processing. There are plans in the works to be able to process quail and pheasant in the near future. Any bird that comes to the MPU must be from a NPIP-approved source and have the documentation to prove this. Persons who want to use the MPU

must first complete a two-day training course. A user agreement and waiver must be signed each time the MPU is rented. Persons qualified for Halal or Kosher processing may use the MPU as long as they have also completed the MPU operator training.

SS Enterprises
9010 Richardsville Rd.
Bowling Green, KY 42101
(270) 777-0240
kybarb2002@msn.com
www.aboutssenterprises.com
USDA inspected. Will process chicken, quail, and turkey.

Michigan

Toby and Verda Yoder
4480 Valley Highway
Charlotte, MI 48813
(517) 541-1081
State inspected.

Minnesota

Bar 5 Poultry
23160 441st Ave.
Arlington, MN 55307
(507) 964-5612
State inspected. Will process all types of poultry except ratites. Will take a maximum of 100 birds with no minimum per order. Birds can be vacuum sealed or bagged, flash frozen, or fresh. Cut-up and smoking services are available. Can also handle special requests such as gift wrapping and snack sticks.

Burt's Hilltop Poultry
RR 1, Box 187
Utica, MN 55979
(507) 932-3431
USDA inspected and certified organic. Will process all poultry except ratites. Can process a maximum of 3,000 birds per day with no minimum. Birds can be packaged fresh or frozen in cryovac bags. Cut-up services available on request. Able

to provide alternative processing such as Buddhist and Confucian..

Farmers Produce
103 Melby Ave.
Ashby, MN 56309
(218) 747-2749
Periodically has inspector on site for state inspection. Will process chickens, turkeys, waterfowl, quail, pheasants, chukars, and pigeons. Can handle approximately 1500 birds a day, depending upon the species, with no minimum order required. Vacuum seal packaging with cut-up and smoking services provided upon request. Available to handle poultry from mid-May through mid-December.

Hector Meat Processors
PO Box 627
Hector, MN 55342
(320) 848-2622
State inspected and in the process of becoming certified organic. Only process chickens. Can process a maximum of 1400 birds and has a minimum of 50 birds per order. Birds are packaged in cryovac bags. Whole or halved birds are available.

Olson Locker, Inc
917 Winnebago Ave.
Fairmont, MN 56031
(507) 238-2563
State inspected. Specializes in commercial broilers and broad-breasted white turkeys but will also process pheasants, peacocks, and colored birds. Call in advance. Can handle up to 650 birds a day, depending upon the species; minimums are the same as those specified for state inspection. Packaging is fresh or snap frozen, bagged or non-bagged, based on customer request. Cut-up services are available.

Pilgrim's Way Farm
27887 County 14
Browerville, MN 56438
(320) 594-2350
www.pilgrimswayfarm.com
State inspected and certified organic. Will process chickens, turkeys, guinea fowl, pheasants, and occasionally quail and pigeons. Can handle approximately 300-500 birds a day, depending upon the species. Birds can be packaged fresh or frozen, vacuum packed or customer bagged. Cut-up services are provided.

Vernon Center Locker
PO Box 313
Vernon Center, MN 56090
(507) 549-3172
State inspected. Will process chickens and turkeys only. Can handle approximately 650 birds a day, depending upon the species, with no minimum orders. Birds are vacuum-sealed or bagged, fresh or frozen. Smoking and cut-up services are provided.

Mississippi

Ponderosa Processing
300 Ponderosa Ave
DeKalb, MS 39326
(601) 743-2626
Contact: Craig Hertel, Steve, or Wayne
USDA inspected. Will process anything (poultry, livestock, ratites, etc.) except waterfowl. Cost for birds includes packaging with cryovac bags and labels. Require a minimum of 250 birds and maximum 800 birds, with plans to expand capacity.

Nebraska

North Star Neighbors, LLC
Fullerton, NE 68638
Contact: Jim Knopik
(308) 536-2475
State inspected plant using a mobile processing unit (MPU) owned by the co-op. You must be a mem-

ber of the co-op in order to use the MPU. Will process all species of poultry except ratites.

New York

Dines Farms, Inc
176 Dingman Road,
Oak Hill, NY 12460
info@dinesfarms.net
www.dinesfarms.net
(518) 239-8203
fax (518) 239-8446
Contact: John Payton
State inspected. Process all species of poultry.

Hermann Weber
HLW Acres
1727 Exchange St
Attica, NY 14011
(585) 591-0795
State inspected.

North Carolina

Farmers Fresh All Natural Poultry
475 Industrial Drive
Bladenboro, NC 28320
(910) 648-2738
USDA inspected. Poultry processing plant for independent producers.

JBF Processing
2305 Jay Shambley Rd.
Pittsboro, NC 27312
(919) 799-3300, (919) 799-3258
marymoize@msn.com
USDA inspected. Equipped to slaughter any poultry (turkeys or smaller) and rabbits. Capacity is 500 birds per day, with the ability to do further processing (de-boning and cut-up).

Ohio

King & Sons Poultry
8091 Horatio-Harris Creek Rd.
Bradford, OH 45308
(937) 448-2448
Contact: Marylin
State inspected. Can handle a maximum of 800 birds a day. Will process most poultry species except waterfowl.

Oregon

Greener Pastures Poultry
88741 Torrence Road
Noti, OR 97461
(541) 935-7952 (phone & fax)
cgrowers@epud.net
greenerpasturespoultry.com
Contact: Aaron Silverman
State inspected. Will process chickens and turkeys from farmers that are members of the cooperative.

Pennsylvania

Eli Reiff
922 Conley Rd.
Mifflinburg, PA 17844
(570) 966-0769
State inspected.

South Carolina

Williamsburg Packing Co.
920 Eastland Ave.
Kingstree 29556
(843) 355-6447
Contact: Sep Harvin III
USDA inspected. Offer many types of valued added processing including sausage and grinding. Will process chickens, hogs, and custom beef (not for resale). Plan to offer processing for other species in the near future. Vacuum packing is available.

Sweet Bay Acres
20118 Augusta Hwy.
Roundo, SC 29474
(843) 835-8882
Contact: Ted Cheuning
Not state or USDA inspected yet, but working toward qualification. Will only accept birds from NPIP-approved flocks. Processes chickens and turkeys only.

Upstate Farmers Alliance
Processing Plant
1038 Pinckney Road
Pauline, SC 29374
(864) 595-0344

The plant began processing deer, beef, pork, lamb, and goats in January 2006, planning to process poultry soon after and become state or USDA inspected. The current inspection status of the plant is not known.

Texas

Windy Meadows Family Farm
8045 CR 4209
Campbell, TX 75422
(903) 886-7723
mhale@worldlogon.com

Contact: Mike Hale
State inspected. Will process chickens and turkeys.

Virginia

Eco Friendly Foods, LLC
3397 Stoney Fork Rd.
Moneta, VA 24121
(540) 297-9582

Contact: Bev Eggleston
USDA inspected. Will process all species of hoofstock and poultry Offers vacuum packaging.

Gore's Processing, Inc
12526 South Middle Rd.
Edinburg, VA 22824
(540) 984-8138

USDA inspected and Humane Certified for livestock.

Washington

Washington State University
Stevens County, WA
(509) 684-2588
tswagerty@wsu.edu

Contact: Terry Swagerty
State inspected. Have a mobile processing unit (MPU) available to the public. Can process chicken, rabbits, and turkeys. Producers must attend training session with annual follow-up class. Producers must join the co-op in order to use the facility. Co-op will take over operation of the MPU, but will still be working in cooperation with WSU.



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