

White House Turkey – by Ed Lentz, Hancock County Extension

Turkey will be on the plate for many Ohioans as well as many others across the country this Thanksgiving. According to agricultural statistics, many families celebrate holiday dinners with turkey.

Turkey production is an important industry in Ohio. According to the 2013 U.S. Agricultural statistics, Ohio ranks tenth in turkey production of the 50 states. The top three states are Minnesota, North Carolina, and Arkansas.

Ohio raised 5.5 million turkeys in 2013 – 2% of the turkeys raised in the United States. Annually, Ohio produces more than 219 millions pounds of turkey, valued at more than \$158 million. The state's turkey industry has created 2,183 jobs that have provided \$71 million in earnings.

This year Ohio's turkey industry has an additional honor besides its dollar contribution to Ohio agriculture – Cooper Farms, the largest turkey producer in Ohio, will be responsible for providing the turkey to the White House.

The chairman of the National Turkey Federation has the honor of presenting the White House turkey. Gary Cooper, chief operating officer of Cooper Farms and a native of northwestern Ohio, currently holds the chairman position and will present the selected turkey to President Barack Obama.

Cooper Farms have been preparing for the event for the past year so the selected turkey will be mature and give a good show at the ceremony. The process started with selection of about 60 poults (chicks) in early July from the hatchery near Oakwood in Paulding County.

Poults were raised in a special barn built for the elite flock near Fort Recovery (Mercer County). The special barn was built for biosecurity purposes so the general public could view the celebrity turkeys without jeopardizing the health of the regular production flocks.

The elite flock number will be further reduced prior to the final selection. Birds selected are based on behavior traits more so than looks. Two birds will be selected to make the trip to Washington D.C.

The second turkey will be alternate in case something unexpected happens to the first bird. In 2008 the first turkey became ill the night before and the alternate filled its spot.

The selected turkeys will stay at the Willard Hotel in a private room adjacent to the handler a few days prior to the ceremony. The final turkey selected has to be trained to be comfortable around large crowds, loud noises, flash photography, and to have a good stage presence.

A few sources state that the tradition of a turkey given to the White House began with Ulysses S Grant. However, more reliable sources have the annual practice of a turkey being presented to the president began with Harry S. Truman.

Records show that John F. Kennedy may have been the first President to spare the turkey from the dinner table. George H.W. Bush was the first to start the tradition of an official Presidential pardon, which has been repeated since his first year in office.

The pardoned turkeys are often released to farms in Virginia. Some have gone to the Disney resorts to be honorary grand marshals for their Thanksgiving Parades.

Mount Vernon received the pardoned turkeys for several years until it was determined that it violated the historical accuracy rules of Washington's estate. George Washington was never a turkey farmer.

This year's ceremony will be the Wednesday before Thanksgiving. The last time Ohio provided the national turkey was during the Clinton administration. Once again Ohio can be proud of their contribution to the agricultural industry.