

TURKEYS

SEASONAL PRODUCTION

CALU FACTSHEET

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INTRODUCTION

The wild ancestors of domesticated turkeys were native to north America. The name turkey is thought to have arisen from confusion: the birds were originally thought to be a type of guinea fowl, for which turkey-cock is an alternative name. Turkeys were first brought to Spain in the 16th century and then rapidly spread throughout Europe.

Turkey is a highly nutritious meat. It is high in protein, low in total fats and particularly saturated fats. At the same time it is a rich source of B vitamins and essential minerals including zinc and selenium. The healthy qualities of turkey meat are an important characteristic to emphasise with marketing.

The number of turkeys produced in the UK is declining each year. Of the 17 million turkeys produced in the UK in 2006, around 10 million went to the Christmas market. There are around 150 registered turkey producers in Wales, supplying more than 300,000 birds each year. Monmouth is Wales' principal turkey rearing county.

Turkey production in the UK splits into two: all year round (AYR) production and seasonal production. The latter is primarily for the Christmas market. AYR production is dominated by highly efficient large scale producers, e.g. Bernard Matthews and Cranberry Foods. The seasonal market offers more opportunities for small scale producers and is the focus for this leaflet.

PRODUCTION SYSTEMS

Turkey production systems are generally described under three broad categories:

Conventional / controlled environment – these are usually large scale, highly controlled environments to maximise production. These are the systems used by the large AYR producers.

Barn / Pole barn – these are usually smaller scale than conventional systems and often utilise a barn or building that is used for other purposes during the rest of the year. Generally there is little or no automation so manual inputs are higher than in conventional systems.

Free range – is often integrated with pole barn systems. There are strict EC regulations governing the term “free range” and producers need to ensure their system is compliant with these if they want to use the term. They include: in-house stocking must not exceed 25kg liveweight / m² and each bird must have access to at least 4m² of range which is mainly covered in vegetation. Free range turkeys must be at least 70 days old at slaughter.

Within these management systems, producers also have a choice of whether to breed their own birds or to buy in young stock. If buying in stock, a further choice is the age at which to purchase the birds. If rearing day old birds (poults), they will need to be kept indoors in a clean, dry, draft free and heated environment until they are feathered. Once fully feathered, they no longer need supplementary heat, but they still need a warm, dry, draft free place to roost.

Many farmers choose to buy in day old poults and rear the birds for the Christmas market. To produce a high quality, slow growing, traditional dark feathered bird, this means buying the poults in May or June.



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BREEDS / STRAINS

There are about 10 turkey strains in production in the UK at the moment. For small scale non-intensive production, a slow growing bird should be selected. Popular strains in the UK are the Norfolk Black, the unimproved Bronze and the Bourbon. All of these are slow-growing birds that produce flavoursome meat suited to the premium market.

FEED & WATER

Proprietary turkey feeds should be used to ensure the appropriate balance of nutrients. Different feeds are needed at different stages of the animals' growth: starting with starter crumbs, followed by starter pellets, then grower pellets and finally finisher pellets.

Adequate water consumption is of vital importance to turkeys. Access to clean fresh water must be provided at all time.

COSTS

Costs of production vary widely depending on factors such as: scale of production; heating; strain of bird; whether single sex production; finishing weight; feed costs and ration composition. As a guideline, small scale seasonal production of white birds will cost around £15/bird; rising to around £18/bird for bronze turkeys. Production is not cheap; therefore, it is essential (and possible) to obtain a premium price for home grown birds. Current prices for pre-ordered turkeys for Christmas 2008 selling direct to the consumer range from £8/kg to more than £15/kg (nb these prices are for oven ready birds, so slaughter and preparation costs need to be taken into account).

SLAUGHTER

Producers rearing less than 10,000 birds per annum and selling direct to the final consumer may slaughter the birds on their premises, provided that:

- the Food Standards Agency (FSA) and Local Authority have been notified and given approval;
- the premises have appropriate health and safety measures in place and have been approved by the State Veterinary Service;
- AND the slaughter person holds a **Registered Licence** for slaughtering turkeys with the specific equipment to be used. Note that licenses for slaughtermen are very specific to both the species and the equipment that the assessment took place on.

For larger producers, birds must go to a registered slaughter premises. A list of currently registered turkey slaughterhouses is available on the FSA website (www.food.gov.uk).

HEALTH & WELFARE

All birds should be checked at least twice a day to ensure any problems are spotted as soon as possible. Turkeys that are overstocked or stressed (e.g. insufficient feed or water, over heating) may peck each other, even to the extent of cannibalism.

A wide range of health problems can affect turkeys. It is imperative that any signs of ill health are discussed with your vet as soon as they are spotted. Ensuring good practice in terms of hygiene, management and biosecurity are fundamental to minimising the risks of disease outbreaks. Some of the principal disease problems for turkeys are:

Turkey rhinotracheitis (avian metapneumovirus infection) – this is a significant problem in conventional systems, but less so for seasonal producers. Vaccines are available but their efficacy is variable.

Coccidiosis – a single cell parasitic organism that infests the gut wall of the host bird. Coccidiostatics are available but their efficacy is variable. Keeping litter as dry as possible and thorough disinfection of housing after the birds are removed is essential.

Histomoniasis (blackhead) – caused by a protozoan. The symptoms are variable, but frequently cause darkening of the wattle and head skin (hence the common name blackhead). There are no licensed treatments for this condition. Good biosecurity is key to preventing its occurrence, including ensuring stock are bought in only from reputable suppliers.

Avian influenza has not, so far, been a major problem for turkey producers in Wales. However, all producers need to be aware of the risk of the disease and have a contingency plan in place in case there is an outbreak.

LEGISLATION (see also Slaughter, above)

The welfare of turkeys (and all other farmed animals) is protected by the Animal Welfare Act 2006 and by the Welfare of Farmed Animals (Wales) Regulations 2007. The “Code of recommendations for the welfare of livestock – Turkeys” outlines minimum best practice standards that all producers should aim for.

Producers with more than 50 birds **must** register their holding on Defra’s Great Britain Poultry Register (tel: 0800 634 1112 or visit <https://secure.poultry.defra.gov.uk/wps/portal/lut/pl.scr/Login>)

MARKETS

Timing turkey production to coincide with the peak of demand at Christmas is the key to success. Many small scale producers grow the turkeys to order – after the first year, this is easy as satisfied customers will usually ask for a bird for the following Christmas soon after eating this year’s. For new producers local advertising will be necessary. Word of mouth is a very effective mechanism, and making use of the intranet and noticeboards that local employers have is an effective and low cost way of promoting your produce. Producers need to encourage their customers to pre-book their turkeys as early as possible to avoid disappointment.

FURTHER READING / SOURCES OF INFORMATION

National Farmers’ Union – supports and promotes UK turkey producers. They have a specific turkey website: www.ukturkeys.co.uk

www.poultrysite.com – website devoted to all aspects of poultry production, including turkeys, with useful information on production methods and diseases.

Since 2007 there has been a Quality British Turkey production standard in operation allowing approved producers to have the Red Tractor logo on their produce. The standard is available at www.redtractor.org.uk and provides a range of useful information.

The British Poultry Council – www.poultry.uk.com – trade association for the UK poultry sector.

The State Veterinary Service / Defra provide information on the requirements for licensing of slaughter people and premises –

www.defra.gov.uk/animalh/welfare/farmed/slaughter/guidance.htm

The Humane Slaughter Association (HSA) provides a useful booklet on the requirements for legal and humane slaughtering. The HSA also runs courses on safe and humane slaughter of turkeys, which can be a route to obtaining a Registered Licence for slaughter. Visit www.hsa.org.uk for further information.