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Margaret Webb

There may be Ontario-raised organic turkey for Christmas after all.

In the wake of public outcry, protests from farmers and a *Saturday Star* article about their plight, Ontario's minister of Agriculture, Food and Rural Affairs has stepped up efforts to protect organic turkey producers.

The office of Leona Dombrowsky said this week she was taking action to eradicate a Catch-22 that put Ontario organic turkey in jeopardy.

The *Saturday Star* story, part of the "Crisis on the Farm" series, pointed out that while Turkey Farmers of Ontario (TFO), the industry marketing board, tells growers they must confine turkeys indoors to reduce the transmission of avian influenza from wild birds, new national organic standards from the Canadian Food and Inspection Agency (CFIA) mandate raising organic birds outdoors.

Janice and Matthew Dick, who raise 400 birds on their open-air, antibiotic-free, 80-hectare farm in Markdale, Ont., had challenged the TFO rule, introduced last year, that requires constant confinement of all "quota" turkeys (raised in a flock of more than 50 birds). The Dicks lost at an agriculture ministry appeals tribunal in December, which meant they would also lose their organic certification.

TFO acknowledged in an email that it had received a letter from Dombrowsky on Oct. 13 referring it to Chicken Farmers of Ontario regulations that allow organic poultry access to pasture.

The minister also asked Geri Kamenz, chair of the Ontario Farm Products Marketing Commission, to work with TFO to find a solution that accommodates the free-range organic production of turkeys.

"I had received numerous letters from consumers and also turkey farmers, who would like to market organic turkeys in Ontario," Dombrowsky said of her decision. "The McGuinty government has been a great supporter of organics. They are a very healthy sector.

"We do have other provinces in Canada that allow it (organic production of poultry)."

The Marketing Commission regulates producer marketing boards in the supply-managed turkey, chicken and dairy sectors.

"The minister has said we need to supply consumers with fresh organic turkeys to meet consumer demand. The industry has heard loud and clear that it has to find a solution," Kamenz said.

"It means revisiting the (TFO's) regulations that currently exist and say they are fairly exclusive in terms of not allowing production."

Turkey Farmers of Ontario, comprised of 192 quota-holding farmers and with an elected board, controls nearly half of Canada's annual quota turkey production – 60 million kg a year. The smallest of these confinement barns raise about 35,000 turkeys a year.

The Organic Council of Ontario, which supported the Dicks and one other organic turkey operation in their appeal, maintains the TFO was concerned with protecting commercial production of confined birds against the "superior alternative" of free-range organic production.

David Waltner-Toews, a professor at the University of Guelph's veterinary college, appeared as the only scientific witness at the appeal and said the hearing was about the TFO "protecting its commercial production units" rather than a "discussion about how we manage the system overall."



Matthew Dick, his wife Janice, son Alex (6), and daughters Sarah (4) and Megan (3) at their Markdale organic turkey farm. (Oct. 4, 2009)

ANDREW WALLACE/TORONTO STAR

Kamenz pointed out that the Quebec turkey sector has developed measures to safeguard against avian influenza and also accommodate outdoor production, as has Chicken Farmers of Ontario (CFO) under regulations developed by Chicken Farmers of Canada (CFC). Dombrowsky suggested the TFO look to the Chicken Farmers' regulations as a possible solution to the impasse.

A spokesperson for Chicken Farmers of Canada conceded its regulations are somewhat arbitrary and that it decides on a "case by case" basis, recommending netted "roofs" as well as fenced pastures for larger farms and, for smaller ones, roofed and fenced enclosures that can be moved around pastures.

Ted Zettel, a board director of the Organic Council, said he's "very encouraged" by Dombrowsky's actions. But he's concerned about the CFC's guidelines, saying the Organic Council has asked for them repeatedly and has not received them. As well, netted roofs invite wild birds to roost, which could increase the risk of transmission of avian influenza.

"The ideal solution we've proposed is to require feed and water be kept under a solid roof and birds be fenced in to keep predators out," Zettel said. Confining birds completely indoors eliminates grazing, which is the point of organics.

"We really just want the freedom to raise animals and livestock according to organic principles, which has been done for centuries. It's about trying to give livestock and crops their natural environment to grow in," he said.

Kamenz said any industry solution would not be "arbitrary" and ensure "all concerns have been represented.

"It would be nice to have a solution in place before the next big turkey season, which is Christmas."