Talking turkey on Thanksgiving

For agriculture, it is the time of year that we talk turkey. Turkey production in the U.S. has fully recovered from the 2015 loss of seven million turkeys from the avian influenza. Based on the latest available statistics, the United States produces about 242.5 million turkeys a year, which provide about 7.5 billion pounds of turkey meat.

Minnesota traditionally raises the most turkeys in the U.S., about 42 million annually. North Carolina is the second largest producing state with 32.5 million. Ohio ranks ninth — raising 6.7 million turkeys a year.

Two-thirds of the turkeys raised in the U.S. come from six states: Minnesota, North Carolina, Arkansas, Indiana, Missouri and Virginia.

Hancock County does not have any large commercial turkey producers, but Putnam County has an egg layer operation. The 2012 Agriculture Census shows Mercer, Darke and Paulding as the top three turkey-producing counties in Ohio.

Ohio turkey flocks annually consume about 4.4 million bushels of corn, most of it raised locally. The Ohio turkey industry annually earns $101 million and provides 2,879 jobs.

The top three turkey processors are Butterball, Jenny-O and Cargill. Family-owned Cooper Farms of Oakwood, Ohio (eastern Paulding County) is the 11th-largest turkey processor in the U.S.

It takes about 28 days for a turkey egg to hatch and about 22 weeks for a tom turkey to reach market size. Turkey meat consumption generally increases the fourth quarter of the year because of Thanksgiving and Christmas, but turkey has become more popular throughout the year.

Turkey ranks fourth behind chicken, beef and pork as a protein source. The average American eats about 16.7 pounds of turkey each year. Nearly half of U.S. consumers eat turkey at least once every two weeks — a fourth of that from deli meat.

One survey showed that 88 percent of Americans ate turkey on Thanksgiving Day. The typical Thanksgiving turkey weighs about 16 pounds.

In recognition of the American turkey producer, I want to share a list of turkey facts provided by the University of Illinois Extension:

- Turkeys lived almost 10 million years ago. They are native to northern Mexico and the eastern United States.
- Native Americans hunted wild turkey for its sweet, juicy meat as early as 1000 A.D.
- Turkey feathers were used to stabilize arrows and adorn ceremonial dress, and the spurs on the legs of wild tom turkeys were used as projectiles on arrowheads.
- Turkeys were domesticated in Mexico and brought to Europe in the 16th century.
- Turkeys are believed to have been brought to Britain in 1526 by Yorkshire man William Strickland. He acquired six turkeys from American Indian traders and sold them for tuppence in Bristol.
- Henry VIII was the first English king to enjoy turkey, and Edward VII made turkey eating fashionable at Christmas.
- In England 200 years ago, turkeys were walked to market in herds. They wore boots to protect their feet. Turkeys were also walked to market in the United States.
- A large group of turkeys is called a flock.
- Wild turkeys were almost wiped out in the early 1900s. Today there are wild turkeys in every state except Alaska.
- Turkey eggs are tan with brown specks and are larger than chicken eggs.
- Baby turkeys are called pouls, male turkeys are called toms, and female turkeys, hens.
- Tom turkeys have beards, which are black, hair-like feathers on their breast. Hens sometimes have beards, too.
- Male turkeys gobble. Hens do not, they make a clicking noise. Gobbling turkeys can be heard a mile away on a quiet day.
- Turkeys have been bred to have white feathers. White feathers have no spots under the skin when plucked.
- Turkeys have a long, red, fleshy area called a snood that grows from the forehead over the bill. The fleshy growth under a turkey's throat is called a wattle.
- Turkey is low in fat and high in protein. It has more protein than chicken or beef. White meat has fewer calories and less fat than dark meat.

- Giblets are the heart, liver and gizzard of a poultry carcass. Although often packaged with them, the neck of the bird is not a giblet.

- Eating turkey does not cause you to feel sleepy after your Thanksgiving dinner. Carbohydrates in your dinner (or beverages consumed watching football) are the likely cause of sleepiness.

- The five most popular ways to serve leftover turkey: as a sandwich, in stew, chili or soup, casseroles and as a burger.

- The ballroom dance the "turkey trot" was named for the short, jerky steps that turkeys take ... and there is still time to sign up for the Women's Resource Center Turkey Trot 5k on Nov. 22.

As you sit down with friends and family this holiday, remember to thank a farmer for making this meal available and affordable. Happy Thanksgiving!

Lentz is extension educator for agriculture and natural resources for The Ohio State University Extension Service in Hancock County. He can be reached at 419-422-3851 or via email at lentz.38@osu.edu.

Lentz can be heard with Vawn Wickerham on weekdays at 6:35 a.m. on WFIN, at 5:43 a.m. on WKXK-FM, and at 5:28 a.m. at 106.3 The Fox.