

## Turkey Farming: How Intensive Breeding Is Transforming the Industry

[Caroline Christen, SentientMedia.org](#)

November 18, 2020



Photo by [Andrew Skowron](#)

For most Americans, Thanksgiving would not feel complete without a roast turkey on the dinner table. Legend has it that turkey was [served](#) at the First Thanksgiving in Plymouth Colony in 1621, and the Thanksgiving tradition of presenting turkeys to the U.S. president dates back to 1947. Eating turkey is considered an American tradition, but how turkeys become food is much less glamorous.

Turkeys available at supermarkets today are the result of intensive farming. Selective breeding and commercial farming techniques have altered the appearance and damaged the general quality of life for turkeys. Commercial turkeys have little in common with the wild turkeys of 1621 or even the domesticated turkeys of 1947. Today, millions of turkeys around the globe are bred, killed, and eaten every year.

### What Is Turkey Farming?

Turkey farming is the practice of raising and slaughtering turkeys for meat. Domesticated turkeys are descended from *Meleagris gallopavo*, a subspecies of wild turkeys indigenous to parts of Mexico, Canada, and the United States. Turkeys were domesticated as early as [100 BCE](#) in Mesoamerica and exported to Europe during the 16th century. But modern domesticated turkeys differ from wild turkeys in one big way: they are bred to gain weight quickly. And unlike chickens, domesticated turkeys are [only farmed](#) for meat and not for eggs.

The world's [top turkey producing country](#) is the United States, followed by Brazil, Germany, France, and Italy. In the U.S., four states—Arkansas, Minnesota, Virginia, and Indiana—[accounted](#) for more than half of all turkeys slaughtered in 2019. The turkey industry itself is incredibly lucrative. The value of all turkeys produced in the U.S. during 2019 was [\\$4.30 billion](#), and most turkeys were produced using intensive farming techniques. Only 3 percent of turkey meat revenue—[\\$139 million](#)—was generated by farms certified as organic.

### How Are Turkeys Farmed?

Commercial turkey farming involves four stages: breeding, hatching, fattening, and slaughter. Female turkeys (hens) and male turkeys (toms) intended for breeding are raised in separate barns until they are around 28 weeks old. Most modern turkey breeds can no longer mate due to their weight, and turkey hatchlings (poults) are conceived through

artificial insemination. Workers manually stimulate male turkeys to collect their semen, which is then used to inseminate female turkeys. During artificial insemination, female turkeys are held upside down and restrained manually or by so-called [insemination benches](#) that protect workers and minimize injury to the birds.

Breeding hens lay [100 to 130 eggs](#) for 6 to 7 months until their productivity declines. In commercial settings, turkey hens lay eggs in nest boxes that automatically force out the hens several times and move the eggs to a conveyor belt. Workers only manually collect eggs when turkeys have laid them on the floor of the barn. Turkey eggs are then transported to commercial hatcheries, where they are placed into incubators.

After hatching, female and male hatchlings intended for meat production are separated and moved to rearing houses that are heated to mimic the warmth that would typically be provided by the poults' mother. Rearing houses are lit for up to 23 hours a day to ensure that the poults can find food and grow rapidly. After [4 to 6 weeks](#) in the rearing house, the young turkeys are moved to so-called finishing barns, where they stay until they are sent to slaughter.

### **How Long Does It Take to Grow Turkeys?**

Turkey eggs hatch within 28 days. A farmed turkey's lifespan [depends](#) on the turkey's gender. Hens are considered ready for slaughter at 14 to 16 weeks old, and male turkeys at around 19 weeks old. Some intensively farmed turkeys are slaughtered as young as [12 weeks old](#).

### **What Do Turkeys Eat on a Farm?**

Farmed turkeys typically eat pellets made from corn and soybean meal fortified with vitamins and minerals. The composition of turkey feed varies depending on the turkeys' life stage. Turkey feed is high in protein to promote rapid muscle growth.

Turkeys also receive antibiotics to treat or prevent diseases common in turkey farming. In 2017, [41 percent](#) of turkeys received antimicrobials in U.S. hatcheries. Since farmed turkeys are larger and live longer than farmed chickens, they require larger doses of antibiotics to survive intensive farming. In 2018, U.S. poultry farmers used at least [426 mg/kg](#) of antibiotics in turkeys compared to 25 mg/kg in chicken, which means that an average turkey received a dose of antibiotics seventeen times higher than an average chicken.

In the wild, turkeys spend up to [90 percent](#) of their waking time foraging for food. Poults eat small insects, while older turkeys eat both plants, such as fruit, acorns, and grasses, and animals, such as larvae, grasshoppers, and beetles. On farms, turkeys only spend around 8 percent of their time eating.

### **Why Is Turkey Farming Bad?**

Turkey farming forces millions of turkeys to endure short lives under conditions that ignore turkeys' physical, mental, and social needs. In the wild, turkeys move one to two miles a day, roaming territories that stretch as far as [1,000 acres](#). Turkeys roost in trees, dust-bathe to keep their plumage clean, and can [run and fly](#) at speeds of 10 to 20 and 55 miles per hour, respectively. Turkey hens form tight-knit bonds with their poults and take care of them for at least [five months](#). After leaving their mother at the end of fall, brother turkeys often [form](#) all-male groups and stay together permanently. Turkey farming takes all of these freedoms away.

## **Monstrous Breeding**

Commercial turkeys have been bred to yield as much meat as possible in the shortest time possible. In the U.S., the average weight of a turkey has more than doubled from **15 pounds** in 1960 to **32 pounds** in 2019.

Farmed male turkeys grow to an average weight of **41 pounds**, while hens average 17 pounds. Wild male turkeys weigh between 11 to 24 pounds and female turkeys 5 to 12 pounds, which means that domesticated male and female turkeys are 234 and 200 percent heavier than their wild counterparts, respectively. Up to **40 percent** of a farmed turkeys' body weight consists of breast muscles, which are considered to be more desirable cuts of meat by producers and consumers.

While turkeys have been bred to grow more rapidly, their bone structure has remained the same, resulting in severe health problems. Many farmed turkeys can neither run, fly nor mate and sometimes even struggle to walk. Domestic turkeys suffer from leg weakness, joint problems, bone fractures, and cardiovascular diseases such as heart failure. Domestic turkeys are also more prone to ulcers—referred to as “breast buttons”—because the size and number of protective feathers that cover their body have remained the same while their breasts have grown bigger.

Due to their monstrous breeding, commercial turkeys' lifespan is drastically reduced. Between 2010 and 2017, at least thirteen of the sixteen turkeys presented to the sitting U.S. President were euthanized or died of health conditions within two years of the Thanksgiving turkey ceremony they attended. In the wild, the life expectancy of a turkey is **four to three years**. In captivity, turkeys can live for up to 10 years, depending on their living conditions.

## **Painful Husbandry Procedures**

Young turkeys often undergo husbandry procedures without anesthetic. These procedures result in permanent body mutilation: debeaking, toe trimming, spur removal, and desnooding.

During debeaking, toe trimming, and spur removal, a turkey's beak, toes, and claws are partially amputated. Turkeys who are stressed by the poor conditions prevalent in intensive farming regularly attack other birds out of frustration. All three procedures aim to reduce the severity of the injuries turkeys cause to each other.

Desnooding means that the fleshy appendage that hangs from the top of a male turkey's beak is cut off. The snood is removed as a precaution because it is a popular target of attack for other male turkeys.

## **Enclosed Sheds**

Most farmed turkeys spend their lives in sheds that are barren except for automated food and water stations and litter made of wood shaving. Tens of thousands of turkeys are crowded in windowless, ventilated barns without outdoor access. In enclosed sheds, farmed turkeys cannot forage, perch, roost, form social groups, and perform other typical behaviors like they would in their natural habitats.

## **Intensive Indoor Systems**

Farmed turkeys live in indoor systems under tightly controlled conditions that encourage them to eat more and move less, so they gain weight rapidly and uniformly. Turkey farms non-stop run so-called “lightning schedules” to influence turkeys' metabolism, behavior, and psyche.

Turkeys are exposed to artificial lightning intentionally kept low to prevent aggressive behavior, flying, and other activities that could burn calories and prevent turkeys from turning feed into body mass. The poorly lit conditions where turkeys spend most of their lives can lead to eye abnormalities and even blindness.

## Catching and Transport

Farmed turkeys also suffer during catching and transport. Workers catch turkeys by one or both legs—sometimes at a speed of up to 1,500 birds an hour—and push them into crates later loaded into trucks. Rough handling during the catching process can lead to severe and even fatal injuries in turkeys such as dislocated hips, broken wings, leg fractures, head injuries, amputated toes, and internal hemorrhaging.

During transport, turkeys can barely move within the crates and are often exposed to low or high temperatures and strong winds. In the U.S., all farmed animals, including turkeys, may [legally travel](#) for 28 hours without food, rest, and water. Turkeys often die on their way to the slaughterhouse due to hypothermia, heatstroke, or heart failure associated with extreme stress.

## Confined and Killed in Vast Numbers

Intensively farmed turkeys are kept in conditions that are so crowded that they cannot even flap their wings. Most industrialized farming operations hold around 55,000 turkeys and up to [10,000 turkeys](#) in a single barn. Young turkeys tend to have more space, but their rapidly growing bodies take up more and more space as the turkeys mature.

Crowded barns become increasingly polluted with excrements that soil the litter flooring and release harmful gases such as ammonia and nitrous oxide into the air. In crowded and polluted conditions, turkeys are more likely to suffer from respiratory problems, foot ulcers, skin sores, eye irritation, and heat stress, and are more susceptible to disease in general. At slaughterhouses, turkeys are hung upside down on shackles by their feet. During shackling, turkeys often experience bone fractures because their bones are too delicate to withstand the force needed to attach the shackles to their ankles. Turkeys who struggle to break free after shackling often break or dislocate bones or injure their wingtips.

The conveyor belt moves the shackled turkeys to an electrified water bath where their heads are submerged into the water for stunning. Many turkeys experience electric shocks before being stunned when their wings touch the water before their heads do. After passing the electrified water bath, the turkeys are killed by a rotating blade that slits their throats. Afterward, their bodies go through a tank filled with scalding hot water to prepare them for defeathering.

Post-mortem inspection has [shown](#) that electric stunning fails to properly stun all turkeys, which means that some birds are still conscious when their throats are slit. Sometimes the rotation blade also fails to kill turkeys, who then enter the scalding hot water tank alive.

## Turkey Farming Statistics

Globally, around [655 million](#) turkeys are slaughtered every year. In the U.S., hatcheries [incubated](#) 336 million turkey eggs and hatched 281 million poults in 2019. During the same year, [229 million](#) turkeys raised on around [2,500 turkey farms](#) were slaughtered and processed for food.

The United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) [estimates](#) that 57 percent of turkeys slaughtered in the U.S. are male and 43 percent female. In 2019, the U.S. exported [639 million](#) pounds of turkey meat—about 9 percent of all turkey produced—and imported [12 million](#) pounds.

## How Many Turkeys Are Killed for Thanksgiving?

In 2011, the U.S. Poultry & Egg Association [estimated](#) that Americans ate 46 million turkeys at Thanksgiving, 22 million at Christmas, and 19 million at Easter. A 2015 analysis concluded that [37 million](#) turkeys are killed for Thanksgiving in the U.S. annually.

## Turkey Farming: How Intensive Breeding Is Transforming the Industry

Page 5 of 5

More recent data indicates that turkey consumption on Thanksgiving has been decreasing. In November 2019, Americans spent [\\$643 million](#) on turkey in total, 3.5 percent less than during the previous year, and an average of [\\$20.80](#) for a 16-pound turkey on Thanksgiving. Combined, the two numbers provide an estimate of fewer than 30 million turkeys bought by U.S. consumers for Thanksgiving.

More turkeys may die in 2020 than in 2019 because family gatherings are smaller due to the ongoing pandemic, and Thanksgiving feast with fewer attendees might lead to a higher number of [smaller turkeys](#) being slaughtered.

### What You Can Do To Help

You can help farmed turkeys by transitioning from turkey meat to meat alternatives. Companies like Tofurky and Gardein [offer](#) plant-based options to the traditional Thanksgiving turkey and other [turkey substitutes](#). Alternatively, you can prepare plant-based [Thanksgiving recipes](#) yourself.

If you want to convince others to reduce their meat consumption or give yourself a motivational boost, you might want to consider visiting an animal sanctuary. A [study](#) by Faunalytics has shown that people reported consuming fewer meat products, including turkey, after touring an animal sanctuary.

You can also support an animal sanctuary directly by [symbolically adopting](#) a turkey who has been saved from slaughter.

### Conclusion

Within a few centuries, turkey farming has turned a small number of wild turkeys into millions of overbred birds who only survive because of perpetual human interference. Commercial turkeys are genetically programmed to produce more bodyweight than they can carry and suffer immensely as a result.

Within intensive farming, a turkey's existence is reduced to converting feed pellets into muscle mass. Turkey farming forces intelligent and socially complex animals to go through a highly industrialized system and risks global health by feeding turkeys large amounts of antibiotics to keep them alive in poor conditions.