

**Testimony of Ron Kardel on behalf of the National Turkey Federation
September 25, 2019**

Good morning, Chairman Roberts, Ranking Member Stabenow, Senators Ernst and Grassley and members of the committee. Thank you for the opportunity to share the turkey industry's perspective today.

My name is Ron Kardel, and I'm a turkey farmer from Walcott, Iowa, and Vice Chairman of the Board for West Liberty Foods. On my farm, we raise about 4.2 million pounds of turkey each year and grow corn and soybeans as well. For me, raising turkeys is a family business. I've been around the turkey industry since 1979 and currently farm on my family's homestead which dates to the 1850s. We are one of more than 40 farmer operations that supply turkeys to West Liberty Foods, a grower-owned cooperative in West Liberty and Mt. Pleasant, Iowa. West Liberty also has two additional facilities in Bolingbrook, Illinois, and Tremonton, Utah. West Liberty Foods was formed in 1996 and has grown from its humble roots, when we received a federal loan guarantee to purchase our plant and open our doors, to today processing 22,000 turkeys per day and employing more than 1,500 people in Iowa with an additional 1,100 employees in Utah and Illinois.

I also serve as the Vice Chairman of the National Turkey Federation, which represents the entire U.S. turkey industry from farmers like me to processor companies and our industry partners as well. Last year, more than 244 million turkeys were raised in the United States, and USDA's latest data projects that turkey meat production will reach 5.8 billion pounds this year, similar to where we were in 2018. In total, the turkey industry generates nearly 441,000 jobs. As the industry continues to recover from the avian influenza outbreak in 2015 and gain access to new markets for turkey, we are also working to find more ways to remain competitive and meet consumer demands in a crowded protein field. After all, while turkey may have its big day on Thanksgiving, it's a great protein source year-round. I see significant potential for the turkey industry's growth in the near future, but we need to make sure policies coming out of Washington that affect agriculture and food manufacturing are common sense and preserve rural America's ability to thrive. That's where we need your help, and we look forward to working with Congress, and this committee, to address these issues.

Exports

After several years of recovery from the loss of export markets due to Highly Pathogenic Avian Influenza (HPAI), the turkey industry is now back up above 10 percent of its products that are being exported, and trade continues to play a more

critical role in our industry's ability to grow profitability. Now more than ever, the turkey industry needs our government's assistance opening closed markets or those markets that are open and prohibit U.S. turkey imports in other ways. We are pleased to report that almost all markets that were closed due to the 2015 HPAI outbreak have reopened, but we still lack access to some very critical markets, such as China, as they continue to block U.S. poultry entering the market. We are encouraged and hopeful that the ongoing trade discussions will yield a successful return – having this market available again will greatly improve current soft market conditions.

In 2019, if current trends continue, NTF members expect to export more than 623 million pounds of turkey to over 60 countries. We will continue working with our government to build relationships that benefit not only us but assist those importing countries in growing jobs through further processing and distribution of delicious turkey products.

To that end, the turkey industry continues to hold out hope for the passage of the U.S.-Mexico-Canada Agreement (USMCA). The turkey industry has a fantastic relationship with our business partners in Mexico and Canada and ratifying this agreement will only improve that bond. The agreement preserves access to Mexico, which is by far the largest export destination for U.S. turkey products and allows greater access for products going north to Canada as well. The agreement did not go as far as we were hoping given their supply management system for poultry; however, it is a modest improvement. It also achieves valuable concessions on sanitary/phytosanitary standards across the board. We can't stress enough the importance of Congress and the administration coming together on the agreement as soon as possible.

Additional markets that we are hopeful to improve access to are China, as previously mentioned, and India, which is still only nominally open even though we have been granted access.

Disease Prevention Through Monitoring and Rapid Response

In 2015, the poultry industry was devastated by HPAI, which exponentially reduced our export markets and forced the destruction of flocks throughout my home state of Iowa. Today, with the dangerous spread of African Swine Fever (ASF) throughout the world, we are reminded once again that we must be proactive in limiting our exposure to emerging diseases that are a constant threat. The global spread of HPAI and now ASF shows that no country is immune, and we need to be prepared with an adequate number of well-qualified response teams

who have the resources to work directly with animal agriculture to avoid these diseases through prevention first and foremost. The Farm Bill process created the forward-looking, mandatory National Animal Disease Preparedness and Response Program designed to limit the impacts of foreign zoonotic diseases on U.S. livestock and poultry producers. We are pleased that APHIS has moved forward with posting applications for cooperative agreements, and NTF is working with our state associations to make sure appropriate steps are taken to get those applications in on time. We need to stay focused on targeted efforts, in both monitoring and most importantly rapid response, that reduce the ability of foreign diseases to gain a foothold in this country, devastate our industries and wreck trade markets. The turkey industry appreciates the communication with APHIS on this front and looks forward to creating stronger, coordinated disease prevention measures with your assistance. It is much cheaper to practice the moniker “an ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure,” and we will continue to ask for your assistance protecting our industry.

Immigration

The turkey industry, like the rest of the animal agriculture community, supports immigration reform that includes policies and provisions that will maximize benefits to the industry and ensure a strong and durable immigration system that meets the needs of the U.S. economy. The current system is broken, and we must find a way to modernize it for all involved.

Most turkey plants are located in rural, low-unemployment areas. To fully staff these plants, producers often recruit from outside of their local areas and in many instances must rely on immigrant labor. Existing guestworker programs target only seasonal, on-farm labor and non-agricultural manufacturing. We need workers in our plants year-round, and we stand ready to work with any and all parties to achieve a workable system. The turkey industry hopes that Washington can put the rhetoric aside and find a solution.

As mentioned earlier, the meat and poultry industry has the opportunity to grow and provide additional quality jobs, particularly if export markets can be improved, but we must have workers available to help meet new demands. Otherwise, it will be virtually impossible to capitalize on opportunities when the doors of new export markets are pushed further open. NTF members need better access to a pool of legal, general labor immigrant workers, and we support a visa program that addresses the needs of the meat and poultry processing industries. There is currently no single bill that provides a “silver bullet,” but it is time to resolve the immigration debate for the good all of America’s economy.

Research Priorities

Finally, the meat and poultry industries have been working with USDA, FDA and academia to find innovative ways to combat diseases and conditions that impact food safety and overall animal health. Food safety and animal welfare are our top priorities, and we have committed hundreds of millions of dollars to these tasks. But, the partnership of the federal government is important to us. There is considerable expertise at the Agricultural Research Service, and we simply encourage the federal government to continue committing – and if possible, enhance – resources to improving food safety and animal welfare. Research, modernizing inspections and a streamlined process for new technology approval is critical to maintaining the status of having the safest food in the world.

Once again, thank you for the opportunity to testify today on the state of the U.S. turkey industry and the issues impacting our businesses. I will be happy to answer any questions.