

Investigating the lives of range-grown Diestel turkeys

By Michael Copley, SNFC Merchandising Manager

This article is part of the Co-op's ongoing series about the suppliers who provide the meat, poultry and eggs that we sell. In the last article, we researched the meaning and definition of the term "free range" used by the companies that supply our broiler chicken products. This article will explore the meaning of the term "range grown" used by Diestel Turkey Ranch.

Diestel supplies the Co-op with many turkey products, including our annual Thanksgiving turkeys. The Co-op will be carrying Diestel's range grown turkeys and certified organic Heidi's Hens throughout the season, and we will have a limited number of Diestel's American Heirloom organic bronze turkeys as well.

In the last issue, we reported that there is minimal regulation of the term "free-range." According to USDA labeling standards, "free-range" simply means that an animal has "access to the outdoors." No further requirements are stated either in terms of the amount of time these birds spend outdoors or how open or restricted their access should be.

Distinctions between "free-range" and Diestel's "range grown" might not be obvious to consumers. To clarify the difference we contacted Mick Williams, General Manager at Diestel Turkey Ranch.

We asked what "range grown" means and what kind of objective criteria it involves. Williams explained that the company prefers the term "range grown" over "free-range" for a couple of reasons. For one, the company thinks that "free range" has become overused in the industry and the requirements governing it are minimal. Secondly, given those minimal regulations, they do not believe the term adequately distinguishes Diestel's traditional methods and practices in raising turkeys. Rather than merely having access to the outdoors as the term "free-range" implies, Williams states that adult turkeys (beyond six weeks of age) at Diestel Turkey Ranch actually live outdoors using the natural environment of trees and shrubs in the Sierra Foothills as their shelter areas.

These adult birds live in outdoor pens or fenced areas that range in size from a half acre to 2 1/2 acres. They are exposed to the sun, wind, rain and potential predators. If the reader wonders (as I did) why these turkeys don't just fly away, it is because turkeys are by nature not migratory birds but ground dwellers that spend most of their lives nesting and foraging in defined territories or locales. Diestel birds also have a continuous source of food and water which keeps them content to stay with the flock within the territories defined by their pens.

Younger birds (under six weeks of age) are kept in housed areas, Williams explained. Although these poults are kept indoors, they do have regular access to protected outdoor areas. This is necessary as these younger birds are not yet large enough to protect themselves from predators.

With these clarifications in place, we still wanted to know if Diestel's range grown birds were any more or less able to move about than the minimal requirements of free range birds. We reviewed the Humane Farm Animal Care definitions for free range turkeys, as they provide the most specific guidelines and objective criteria that we can find. You can view these requirements at www.certifiedhumane.org/pdfs/2004-Std04.Turkeys.3A.pdf. (SNFC also keeps a copy at our Customer Service Desk.)

We supplied copies of the HFAC guidelines to Diestel Turkey Ranch and asked whether their range grown birds meet the standards for indoor stocking density (page 7) for their young birds, and whether their entire production could meet the free-range requirements outlined on pages 10 and 11. After he had reviewed the criteria and

run some math calculations, Williams said that the company felt comfortable that their operations met all of the free-range stipulations and provided at least double the minimum spatial requirements outlined by HFAC standards. The company has not applied for Humane Certification, but they may consider doing so in the future.

Diestel Turkey Ranch has been generous in previous years allowing Co-op employees to visit their ranch and view their operation and facilities, and they extended the same invitation to me. I did not visit, but the Co-op employees who had visited the ranch were all quick to confirm what Mick Williams told me, and they complimented the company as one of the most humane and natural operations they have ever seen.

Co-op shoppers are concerned not only with the quality of food that they consume, but they are also interested in the practices employed by the companies who supply it. The Co-op strives to provide the best product available, so we were pleased to find Diestel Turkey Ranch forthcoming and welcoming of our questions. We believe that their products represent some of the best holiday turkeys available.

Consumers should be aware, however, that the “range grown” term does not appear to be regulated and that the information provided here only pertains to the agricultural practices of the Diestel ranch.

Diestel Turkey Ranch: www.diestelturkey.com; 209 532-4950.