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Organizing for Justice:
The DelMarVa Poultry Justice Alliance

Carole Morison
with Polly Walker, MD, MPH
Section A

2005 Interview
Carole Morison

- Operates family farm in Pocomoke City, Maryland
- Raised chickens under contract for 20 years
- Former executive director of the Delmarva Poultry Justice Alliance
- Consultant, Socially Responsible Agriculture Project
“Delmarva” (Delaware, Maryland, Virginia)

Delaware and the Eastern Shores of Maryland and Virginia
Delmarva Poultry

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Q: What Is a Contract Poultry Grower?

- A poultry grower is a farmer who raises chickens

- Under contract with a major poultry company (Tyson, Purdue, etc.)

- Contract growers provide:
  - Land and chicken houses built according to company specifications
  - Fuel for heating
  - Water
  - Labor
  - Disposal of chicken manure and dead chickens

- Poultry company provides the chicks, feed, and additives
Chicken House

- Standard chicken house for approximately 10,000 broiler chickens

Photo courtesy of Carole Morison.
Q: Did You Always Want to Raise Chickens?

Q: Did you always want to have a farm and raise chickens?

Aerial view of poultry houses (not Carole’s)

Q: When did you first realize the industry had problems?

- We built two new chicken houses in the mid-1980s to company specifications and requirements.
- Some of the required items were ordered and paid for, but were never received or installed.
- The company was not concerned.
- This discrepancy concerned us!
Chicken house on Carole Morison’s farm (vertical tank is a feed grain storage silo; horizontal tanks contain propane gas)

Photo courtesy of Carole Morison.
Q: When Did You Start Working with Other Growers?

- 1990s: Read about poultry farmers in the southern U.S. who were organizing a national association
- Had already been discussing injustices in industry
- 1991: Became involved with other farmers
“Vertically Integrated” System

- Company owns chicks from start to finish
  - Breeder flocks, eggs, hatcheries, chicks
  - Catchers hired by company to go onto the farm
  - Slaughter and processing of chicks
  - Preparation of value added products
  - Packaging for market
  - Marketing finished poultry to consumers

- Contract growers must use only company-provided inputs
  - Feed formulations and feed prepared by the company
  - Medications (need and type determined by company)
  - Growth promoters
“Vertically Integrated” System

- Contract growers provide
  - Land
  - Chicken houses built according to company specifications
  - Fuel for heating the chicken houses and water
  - Labor
  - Disposal of chicken manure and dead chickens
Baby Chicks Arrive

- Within 7 weeks, the chicks reach a “marketable age” and weigh 5.5 pounds

Photo courtesy of Carole Morison
Nets are used to help manage the flock during catching process

Photo courtesy of Carole Morison.
“Chicken Catchers”

- Chickens are caught by hand, put into crates that are loaded by forklift onto large trucks.

- Catchers are paid a set amount for every 1,000 chickens they catch, resulting in an average of $100 per day for 10-12 hours of work.

- Until recently this work was done with few or no benefits.

Photo courtesy of Carole Morison.
Company truck loaded with crates of live chickens ready to leave the farm

Photo courtesy of Carole Morison.
Chicken Processing

- Processed at the company plant by company employees

- Contract grower is not present for weigh-in of chickens
  - Payment to contract grower depends on weight of chickens
  - “Good faith” system
Chicken Waste

- Contract growers, not the companies, are responsible for disposing of all waste after the company takes a flock of chickens

- Waste includes ...
  - Dead or ill birds
  - Manure
  - Feathers
Q: Can You Build Your Chicken Houses to Your Specs?

- Each grower (farmer) contracts with a specific poultry company
- The company determines what specifications will be used for each type of house
- The grower builds and pays for the houses
- The most up-to-date specifications often change

Photo courtesy of Carole Morison.
Chicken House

Photo courtesy of Carole Morison.
Q: Can You Explain How Chickens Are Processed?

- Cages of live chickens are unloaded
- Chickens are hung on a conveyer line by “live hangers”
- Slaughtered
- Defeathered
- Gutted
- Processed for specific sales needs
  - Only 10 percent of birds sold as whole chickens
Line Speed

- Workers may have to “process” up to 100 to 115 chickens per minute
Q: How Did You Become Involved With the DPJA?

- The DPJA is evolving into the Delmarva Community Alliance
Retaliation Against Organized Growers

Growers reported the following retaliations when they spoke out against industry:

- Lower quality chicks
- Lower quality feed
- Long waits to weigh birds (they would lose weight through dehydration)
- Manipulated scale weights and payment rankings (bonuses)
- Regional blacklists

Source: Shuman, M. Bay Friendly Chicken.
In 1995 Jim Lewis, an Episcopal minister, was investigating at-risk people living in the Delmarva area.

Rev. Lewis found that people in the at-risk population had one thing in common: some connection to the poultry industry.
Delmarva Poultry Justice Alliance

- DPJA brought together various stakeholders involved in the chicken industry
  - Farmers
  - Plant workers
  - Chicken catchers
  - Environmentalists
  - Community members
  - Faith community

- Despite differences in jobs and socio-economic status, the various stakeholders found that they all face similar issues and problems related to the poultry industry
Q: What Progress Has the DPJA Made?

- 1995: Ad-hoc group began
- 1997: DPJA officially formed

First problem addressed: chicken catchers were not getting paid for all of the hours they were working
  - Company had changed status of catchers from employees to contract workers
  - As contract workers, they lost benefits, insurance, and overtime pay
  - DPJA filed a lawsuit that resulted in reinstatement of catchers as company employees
    - In addition, the catchers were awarded back pay
Role of DPJA

- Constituency based
  - Members go to organization for information, tools, and assistance in accomplishing their own goal

- DPJA has effective relations with company management

- Provides various services as requested by different groups
  - Some groups want to unionize, others do not
  - Organizing prayer vigils
  - Public relations efforts
Q: How Has DPJA Helped Processing Plant Workers?

- Line workers (those who work the conveyer belts in chicken processing plants) forced to work continually with few or no restroom breaks

- After one egregious incident, DPJA organized a prayer vigil among faith community

- Hand delivered letter to company owner

- Simply demanded basic human rights

- Resulted in better working conditions
Q: Is the DPJA Model Useful Elsewhere?

- Brings together all those affected by one problem
- Reduces barriers, sets aside differences, and focuses group work to present one voice in demands
- “If you can do that, you can do anything!”
- The National Poultry Justice Alliance was formed in 2005
Q: What Are the Risks of Being Active?

- When we started growing poultry, we had the same risks as other farmers.

- Risks increased when we began to organize for justice.

- Other growers gave up or were run out of business.

- The Morisons were the only poultry growers still in business from the original national group of growers they had joined.

- Matter of luck, and the company knew they were going to fight.

Photo courtesy of Carole Morison.
“Good Faith” System Favors Companies, Not Farmers

- Delivery of chickens is done by company
  - Weight and healthfulness of baby chicks
  - Some breeds better than others

- Feed delivery amount and content
  - Measured at company facility; not farm

- Weighing of chicks is done at the plant, not farm
Poultry Growers Are “Serfs on Our Own Land”

- Companies have absolute control over the business and what the farmers do

- Contract growers invest 50 percent of all the capital needed to grow chickens

- Grower’s return is less than 3 percent

- Company profits are 33 percent net return
Economics of Poultry Growing

- Each baby chick cost 22.5 cents
- Grower raises it for seven weeks
- Return can actually be *less* per chicken than initial investment, depending on many factors
- Investment on a new poultry house of $200,000 may result in earnings as low as $4,000 per year
- *Baltimore Sun* investigation found a new grower can expect net earnings of only $8,000 until investment loans are paid off in 15 years
Q: Why Do You Keep Growing Chickens?

- Pride—family farms

- Debt
  - Most farms in some areas not worth as much as investment (buildings, barns, equipment)
  - Selling farm would alter loans
Q: Are There New Farms and Farmers?

- New farms are being built by farmers new to the area, often Asian immigrants

- Much larger mega-farms
  - 8 to 20 houses per farm
  - 32,000 chickens per house

- Greater concentration (fewer farms, more chickens per farm) is more profitable for companies
Q: Are There Alternatives to the Current System?

- Yes, but many challenges exist

- One example: “Bay-Friendly Chicken”
  - Research model developed by DPJA and the Chesapeake Bay Foundation
  - Farmer-friendly
  - Worker-friendly
  - Environmentally friendly
  - Organically grown chicken
More Desirable Methods

- Organic feed
  - Does not contain pesticides, heavy metals, antibiotics, or other additives

- Growing chickens with more space per bird and/or free-range chickens

- Improved waste management to protect the environment
Management Methods

- Currently there are no choices in methods or management

- Poultry companies own ...
  - All the hatcheries
  - All the grain and feed
  - All the processing plants

- To raise poultry as an independent grower (i.e., not as a contract grower for a big company), a farmer or cooperative would have to create their own infrastructure (feed sources and processing plants)
Q: What Public Health Problems Do You See?

- Additives put into feed
- Dust in the air
- Bacteria in the manure
- Antibiotic resistance
- Arsenic
Researchers at JHSPH are studying the effects of industrial animal production on public health—on workers, community, and consumers.
“Eating is an agricultural act.”

— The Art of the Commonplace: 
The Agrarian Essays of Wendell Berry