

Poultry producers lobby Oklahoma lawmakers with meat

OKLAHOMA CITY (AP) — Embattled poultry growers and producers descended on the state Capitol to lobby lawmakers and urge an end to a federal lawsuit that accuses them of polluting watersheds with chicken litter.

A week after losing a legal round in the U.S. Supreme Court, poultry industry officials met Tuesday with lawmakers and treated them to a lunch of chicken, beef and pork products as they spread the message that Oklahoma's lawsuit jeopardizes the future of their industry.

"My biggest concern is that the industry is going to be run out of northeast Oklahoma," said Bev Saunders, a Delaware County poultry grower who produces between 500,000 and 600,000 broilers a year in five poultry houses near Colcord for Arkansas-based Peterson Farms.

"We have a lot at stake here, a

huge amount at stake," Saunders said. "We are small family farmers and we're just trying to feed the world. It's important that we survive. We do not want to rely on foreign markets for our food as we do with energy."

State Attorney General Drew Edmondson said the industry has made no overtures to him about resuming failed negotiations to reach an out-of-court solution.

"If they were serious about mediating a solution they'd be talking to me and not the press," Edmondson said.

Last year, Edmondson sued 14 Arkansas poultry companies — including three run by Tyson Foods Inc., the world's largest meat producer — accusing them of tainting Oklahoma waters with the waste from millions of chickens and turkeys.

Last week, the U.S. Supreme

Court rejected Arkansas' attempt to sue Oklahoma over the dispute. Arkansas officials said the federal lawsuit would hurt the state's \$2 billion poultry industry.

Edmondson filed the lawsuit in Tulsa following 3 1/2 years of negotiations over allegations that the poultry industry was legally responsible for polluting the Illinois River watershed.

The lawsuit alleges state and federal laws are being violated by improper disposal of chicken litter containing dangerous metals, bacteria and high levels of nutrients.

Janet Wilkerson, vice president of human resources for Peterson Farms, said neither Peterson nor other poultry producers have broken state law in the application of chicken litter as fertilizer on pastures and fields.

The lawsuit alleges that high phosphorous levels in the waste

cause excessive algae growth and can eventually cause high levels of cancer-causing chemicals in drinking water.

Wilkerson said Peterson and other producers are eager to end the lawsuit and find a solution, including trucking the waste out of the watershed to nutrient depleted areas of western Oklahoma and other states.

"If the law's not right then we need to change them. But it should not be changed in a courtroom," Wilkerson said. "The only people that win would be the attorneys. We would much better be spending that money on solutions."

On the Net:
Oklahoma attorney general:
<http://www.oag.state.ok.us>
U.S. Poultry & Egg Association:
<http://www.poultryegg.org>

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d'oeuvres that are to "die" for and a chance to win a prize if you correctly deduce the murderer. The Murder Mystery will take place 6:30 p.m. Saturday, March 11 Call 460-4470 to RSVP.

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Frost threatens Georgia, South Carolina peaches

ALBANY, Ga. (AP) — Georgia and South Carolina peach growers have cleared the first hurdle for producing the sweet, juicy fruit, but they are still a long way from the finish line.

The trees have the necessary number of chill hours below 45 degrees needed to bloom properly and produce fruit. Now, as the trees are about to bloom, growers hope to dodge a late freeze that could kill the blooms and rob them of a full crop, growers say.

"We pretty much have a solid month or three weeks where we bite

our nails," said Robert Dickey III of Dickey Farms Inc. in Musella, west of Macon, where the temperature dipped into the mid-20s Monday morning. "They're about a week or so away from blooming."

Georgia and South Carolina are the South's two major peach-producing states. Georgia is known as the "Peach State," but South Carolina usually has a larger crop.

Martin Eubanks, a senior commodity merchandizer for South Carolina's Department of Agriculture, said growers in his state will be watching the weather closely for the

next few weeks. Most of South Carolina's peaches are grown in an elevated, well-drained area known as "the ridge" in the central part of the state.

"We have reached adequate chilling hours, so we should be OK," Eubanks said. "Our normal full bloom on the ridge is March 15 and we seem to be right on course for

this season."

Georgia's 2004 crop was considered one of the sweetest in a decade, but a combination of problems — including a cool, wet spring, a disease outbreak and the remnants of hurricanes that swept through the state — made for disastrous production last year, said Kathryn Taylor, a Georgia peach specialist.



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