

**PASA Farmer Profile**  
**Clodhopper Farm**  
**Pete & Eliza Comly**

By Karen Kutish, Clodhopper Farm customer

Our land can give back to us tenfold (or more) what we put into it, and managing our land is the only way we can ensure its viability. Sustainable use of our land strives to see the bigger global perspective, as it takes into account the stewardship of our natural resources by meeting our present needs without compromising the needs of future generations. These ideas epitomize the philosophy underlying Clodhopper Farm.

Pete and Eliza Comly and their three daughters have been running Clodhopper Farm in Springville (Northeastern Pennsylvania) for 9 years. The 50-acre farm sells a variety of pasture-raised meats including chicken, turkey, beef and pork.

Pete and Eliza met as freshman at Albright College; Eliza was a psychology major and Pete was an art major. Neither had grown up on a farm, however Pete worked for a dairy farmer since he was 13. Together, they are successful in their venture by using natural methods of farming coupled with the humane treatment of their animals.

Their livestock are rotationally grazed; all byproducts the livestock produce are composted and returned to the fields to ensure most of the organic matter stays in the soil. This approach to raising their livestock allows the animals to be healthier and thereby decreases the need for antibiotics and other chemicals.

Eliza and I are both employed by the Tunkhannock School District. Eliza is a guidance counselor in the high school and I am a science teacher. As a colleague of Eliza's, I had the chance to visit their farm and learn about their farming methods. In a day and age where mass production and short-term economic returns seem to run agriculture it was very refreshing to see a farm in our community choose an environmentally correct path.

I began taking my Ecology and Plant Biology classes on field trips to see how a farm, such as this, was run. The sustainable farming methods demonstrated by Clodhopper Farm were the same ecological ideas I was trying to impart on my students. Our studies involve land use and the problems with feeding an ever-growing population while attempting to conserve our resources. Global environmental issues are discussed and students visualize solutions to these problems starting with the differences that they can facilitate at the local level. By visiting Clodhopper Farm they get a "hands on" look at caring for our environment, from soil and water conservation to the treatment of animals we are so deeply dependent on for foods and other products.

As one of their customers, their operation is intertwined with ideas I feel very strongly about. I am an environmentalist and I know that if we don't care for our lands now, future generations will face very difficult times. I am also a parent of two small children; therefore, I feel obligated to provide them with the healthiest foods possible. I feel the products from Clodhopper Farm provide my family with the most delicious, safe, and healthiest foods I can purchase.

### **Interview with Pete Comly**

PASA: What do you see as some of the critical issues concerning agriculture today?

Pete Comly: One problem is the high cost of farmland. I think it would be very difficult for beginning farmers to buy farmland and pay for it with farm income. The biggest problem that I am facing is the lack of small USDA inspected slaughterhouses. The processor that we use for our custom butchering gave up their USDA inspection a few years ago because the inspectors were regulating them to the point where it became unprofitable to continue with it. This had nothing to do with the cleanliness of the plant. Mostly these regulations were things that might make sense in a huge meat plant but seem unnecessary in a small shop. As a farm trying to grow our clientele we would like to begin offering individual cuts of beef and pork to customers from an on-farm store, and in order to do that we need those animals to be processed under USDA inspection. With fewer slaughterhouses available for this it means that farmers like me have to transport their livestock greater distances, which increases costs to the customer, and increases stress on the animals.

PASA: What is unique about your farm?

Comly: I think that our customer base is quite unique. We direct market all of our meats to a very dedicated and diverse clientele. I am not great at marketing. What seems to have happened for us is that many of our customers have done much of our marketing for us. We are constantly getting calls from people wanting to be added to our mailing list who have heard about us from other customers, and I think our sales are about to snowball because of that. Our customers run the gamut, from rural senior citizens who want food that tastes like the food they remember, all the way to young families concerned about the safety of the food they are feeding to their children. Some are concerned about environmental issues, humane treatment of livestock, or support for local rural economies. Whatever the case these patrons are a big part of what makes running this farm so enjoyable, and I think that is unique.

PASA: How has your operation evolved over the years?

Comly: When we bought this farm nine years ago our plan was to be mainly an organic vegetable farm powered by draft horses. We also planned to raise

livestock, but mostly on a homesteading level. We struggled with vegetables for a couple of years, but we had a lot of trouble with deer damage, and our 1,400 ft elevation made our growing season a lot shorter than neighboring areas with only 700 ft elevations. When faced with a shortage of time, I always seemed to gravitate toward taking care of the livestock first then working in the market garden if there was any time left over. I saw that as a sign that I should be concentrating on livestock as the main product of the farm. I grew up working on a conventional dairy farm and knew we could never afford that kind of infrastructure. When I began to learn about grass farming, with rotational grazing, and pastured poultry, then all the puzzle pieces seemed to begin to fit together. We had a farm that grew great grass, even in places I was trying to grow vegetables. I loved working with livestock. And the financial requirements for machinery and buildings were low. We have been filling orders for grass-fed beef, natural pork, and pastured chicken for the last three or four years, and began raising pastured turkeys in 2004. It took us a few years to find our way, but I think we are now headed down the right track.

PASA: Why did you join PASA?

Comly: We started out joining PASA primarily for educational purposes. There was so much to learn about the kind of farming we wanted to do. PASA is a great place to learn a lot of this, through field days and the annual conference. A lot of the information I've picked up through PASA has helped to shape our operation. I am thinking especially of the field days at Forks Farm and Eli Reiff's where I learned a lot about pastured poultry and poultry processing. Another reason that we are PASA members is that it is important for sustainable agriculture to have a united voice in Pennsylvania. As an organization PASA is much more able to make our presence known than we could as individuals.