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L.I. Duck Farms Struggle With Water Regulation

By DONNA DEEDY

MORICHES, N.Y. — Long coops, each housing ducks of a different age, hug the ground and form a courtyard at the entrance to the Jurgielewicz family property — believed to be the only major free-range duck farm in the United States.

Inside, on fresh straw bedding, ducks eat organic feed and sip fresh water from automated reservoirs. They breathe fresh air circulating through large windows and waddle outside, where they preen their feathers, shake their tails and splash in man-made puddles with a chorus of quacks.

This 47-acre swath of land in the coastal pine barrens of eastern Long Island, where the Jurgielewicz family has been raising ducks since 1919, is home to thousands of white Pekin ducks that roam the banks of a dammed mill pond. The plastic wrapper of a white Pekin duck raised on the Jurgielewicz farm boasts “Genuine Long Island duckling, South Shore brand, free range.”

In the 1960s, this region, wedged between the Peconic and Moriches Bays, was home to more than 60 farms that produced more than 60 percent of the nation’s ducks. That number has been whittled to two: the Jurgielewicz farm, operated by brothers Paul and Tom, and Crescent Duck Farm, operated by the Corwin family.

Together, they employ about 200 people, generating \$25 million a year in revenue and producing about 10 percent of the nation’s ducks.

Now the two remaining duck farms say they are facing hardship.

The State Health Department says nitrogen levels downstream in the Forge River, a tributary of Moriches Bay, exceed the agency’s standards, a condition the state attributes partially to the duck farming industry upstream.

In spring, an overgrowth of seaweed chokes the water. In summer, blue crabs, eels and juvenile flounder — all bottom fish — rise to the surface, eventually suffocating in oxygen-depleted waters.

“It’s the worst case of anoxia I have seen,” said Larry Swanson, a coastal oceanographer from the Marine Science Research Center at [Stony Brook University](#), who has studied the problem.

In 2006, the Jurgielewicz family put in a new wastewater clarification system after the state’s Department of Environmental Conservation forced them to remove decades of bottom residue from West Mill Pond, which the ducks use. But the family objected months later when the agency drafted strict new wastewater regulations for their farm, requiring the installation of another costly wastewater treatment system by this spring.

Jonathan Sinnreich, a lawyer for the farm, raised objections to the new regulations and requested a hearing. In

a letter to the environmental agency, Mr. Sinnreich requested proof that the conditions in the heavily populated Mastic Peninsula of the Forge River are caused by duck farm activities.

Paul and Tom Jurgielewicz declined several requests for comment. But Doug Corwin, the other duck farmer on Long Island, said, "We're duck farmers, not wastewater specialists."

Mr. Corwin, who recently installed a \$4 million wastewater treatment system at his farm in Aquebogue, 14 miles from here, said that rather than comply with costly wastewater regulations, "most duck farmers over the last 30 or 40 years have found it easier and more economical to sell off their farmland to real estate developers."

In the case of the Jurgielewicz farm, the brothers sold development rights for their farm to Suffolk County and the town of Brookhaven for \$5.6 million last May. Under the terms of the agreement, they still own the farm and can raise their ducks, but can never sell or subdivide the land for real estate development.

Their product, the Long Island duck, is a delicacy for chefs around the world.

"Long Island Pekin duck is mild and tender meat; it's just perfect," says Guy Reuge, the owner of the restaurant Mirabelle in St. James. "We serve Long Island duckling as a specialty prepared with two recipes served over two courses. We render the duck fat to prepare duck confit using only organic ducks from Jurgielewicz. I have personally visited the farm and the cleanliness is impeccable."

Those who live downstream from the farm are less impressed.

"The D.E.C. regulations are a step in the right direction, but we need all problems addressed — we need municipal sewers," said Ron Lupski, who first reported dead fish and rotten-egg smells on the river in 2005. Mr. Lupski, a carpenter, is the head of Save the Forge River, a campaign sponsored by more than 250 local businesses and residents.

As Harry Wallace, chief of the Unkechaug Indian tribe, whose land, now a reservation, has been situated along the Forge River since precolonial times, put it, "Our livelihood depends on the health of this river."

For environmentalists and some residents of the region, there is another culprit: leaching residential cesspools.

"The sheer volume of groundwater that feeds the Forge River and its tributaries, especially in high-density areas, delivers a tremendous nitrogen load, likely far more than, say, a concentrated amount from a point-source discharge," said Robert Waters, supervisor of the Suffolk County Department of Health Services' Bureau of Marine Resources.

"It's not too complicated to understand," said Albert Langhorn, who represents the tribe for the Save the Forge River campaign. "Every 50 feet is a home, each with a cesspool. Sewage has been leaching into the groundwater from these homes for 30 to 40 years now."

But without federal funding, which is not available, municipal sewage treatment projects are not an option, officials said.

Long Island's groundwater has been studied extensively since the 1940s, when wells in densely populated areas of Nassau County were abandoned because of contamination, primarily from residential cesspools. A 1972 study by the federal [Environmental Protection Agency](#) stated that sewage treatment was vital to protect water quality on Long Island, but after disclosures of public corruption surrounding the building of a plant at Bergen Point in Babylon, plans for a facility for the Mastic area were dropped.

"They're always blaming the ducks," said Burt Culver, a fifth-generation duck farmer, whose family helped to establish the industry on Long Island in 1858. "They tried blaming red tide on the ducks. That wasn't true. They tried blaming the shellfish die-off on the ducks, and that problem got worse after most of the duck farms left."

Faced with a growing number of complaints and accusations, in 1960 the Culver family — along with truckloads of white Pekin ducks — moved from Westhampton to Indiana, where most of the nation's ducks are produced today.

"Like my 82-year-old father always says: 'What are people going to eat after they've run all the farmers out of business, tofu?' Farmers grow that, too, you know."

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