

The Thanksgiving turkeys are almost finished off by now, a warm and pleasant holiday memory. But not so long ago, they and thousands of their avian cousins were coming of age on hundreds of farms, some of them in this region, doing what chickens and turkeys do growing up. Elsewhere across the country, similar operations raise cattle and hogs by the thousands. Most Americans love their turkey, ham and pot roast, but do they give much thought to how those yummy meals make it to their dinner tables? And, what the process might be doing to the American landscape? A report released just this month provides yet another glimpse into what effects might be occurring in regions like eastern Oklahoma where large-scale animal-raising operations exist. It's bound to be heralded and disputed, but one central point comes through loud and clear: There are still many unanswered questions about how America puts food on the table. Chicken Little? There's no disguising the fact that the group releasing the report, Environment America, is staunchly pro-environment and no friend of big agribusiness. The report provides voluminous detail on what the advocates believe are extensive and growing environmental threats to the nation's waterways from these massive agricultural operations. No animal feeding operation escapes the group's scrutiny. Is Environment America, a sister organization to the Environment America Research and Policy Center, to be believed? Is Oklahoma's popular Illinois River really facing the dire consequences predicted in this report, along with other beloved waterways like Chesapeake Bay, northeast Texas' Lake o' the Pines, North Carolina's Neuse River, Lake Erie, even the Gulf of Mexico? As most Oklahomans know, a long-awaited decision from a federal judge over poultry-raising practices in the Illinois River watershed has yet to be issued. Attorney General Drew Edmondson, who lost a recent bid to be Oklahoma's next governor, filed the suit against a dozen poultry companies a few years ago over practices that he believes are degrading water quality in the watershed. At issue is the disposal of millions of tons of poultry litter on the land each year, a practice which can aid in farming but which in excess can contribute to water-quality problems. Lawsuits

and limits. The case has been a hard-fought one, and one being watched closely across the country. Many believe opposition from poultry interests, spurred by the lawsuit, may be one reason Edmondson lost his primary race against Lt. Gov. Jari Askins. There is continuing speculation that Oklahoma's new leadership will not pursue the poultry case beyond the trial phase. Environmentalists are concerned what the fate of the Illinois watershed will be if some action isn't taken soon to address the water-quality issues. The outcome of the lawsuit could determine whether the poultry industry is required to drastically alter litter-disposal practices not only in the Illinois watershed, but elsewhere. But even if Oklahoma's lawsuit doesn't result in changes, action on other fronts could. Notably, an Environmental Protection Agency study of pollutant loads in the Illinois River watershed could eventually lead to limits for certain pollutants that can hurt the river's water quality, safety and recreational value. Advocates are closely monitoring the EPA's actions with the hope that the federal agency will accomplish what hasn't been achieved, to date, through other efforts. The just-released report, "Corporate Agribusiness and America's Waterways: The Role of America's Biggest Agribusiness Companies in the Pollution of our Rivers, Lakes and Coastal Waters," will be eye-opening for those unfamiliar with such large-scale operations. The authors assert that such operations "contribute to making more than 100,000 miles of rivers and streams and 2,500 square miles of inland lakes too polluted to sustain important uses such as swimming, fishing, drinking or the maintenance of healthy populations of wildlife." Just the fact that a handful of companies now largely control the nation's food production system means those companies have "vast control over the agricultural marketplace and the practices farmers use to raise food." According to the report, the four largest firms in each sector produce 72 percent of the nation's beef, 63 percent of the nation's pork, and 57 percent of the nation's chicken. These massive operations control the production process from the birth of the animal to the delivery of food to stores. Here at home, the 2,800 poultry farms in the Illinois watershed (2,300 in Arkansas and 500 in Oklahoma) produce as much

waste as would be produced by 10.7 million people, according to the report. The unimaginable amount of waste, in the view of Edmondson and many others, is the chief factor contributing to degradation of the Illinois. Four counties in northwest Arkansas produce 315 million broilers a year, more than are produced each year in all but six states, according to the report. Telling indicator But it isn't just eastern Oklahoma, according to the researchers, that is affected. The Arkansas River basin, which drains much of the poultry-producing region into the Gulf of Mexico, is described as the fastest-growing source of phosphorus to the gulf. "The fate of the Illinois River will be a telling indicator of the future of waterways nationwide affected by chicken waste," the authors conclude. Poultry representatives have aggressively disputed the kinds of charges brought in the report, insisting the industry abides by all applicable laws and regulations, and that other sources may be responsible for any pollution problems. If that's so - if all corporate animal producers are steadfastly abiding by all regulations and laws - then one has to wonder if maybe the regulations and laws aren't adequate. Or if conditions aren't monitored closely enough, or if provisions and strategies contained in the laws aren't vigorously applied. Or if enforcement is an issue in some areas. After all, something is causing problems at all these locations. Oklahoma's lawsuit is yet to be concluded, nor is the Illinois River's fate clear - like the once-pristine waters used to be. Only time will tell if there is the will and a way to save it. Janet Pearson 581-8328 janet.pearson@tulsaworld.com SUBHEAD: Pollution issues still nag