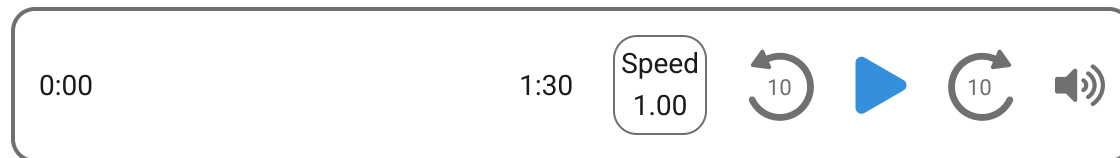


# Q&A with Culver Duck Farms General Manager Sean Smith

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By **Eniola Longe**

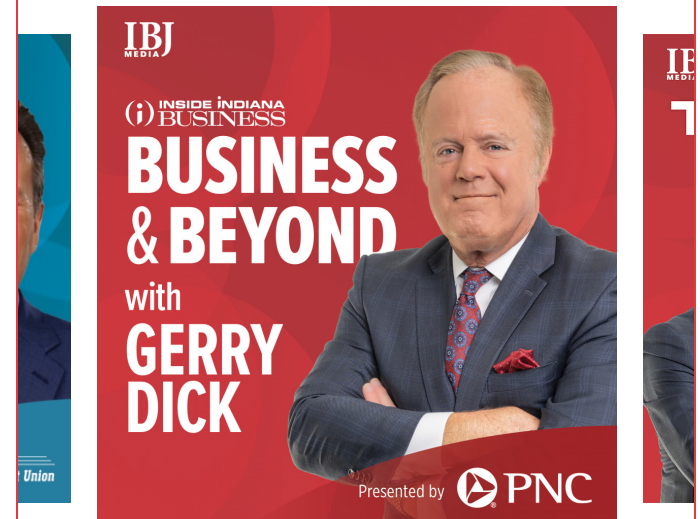
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Culver Duck Farms has donated nearly 600,000 eggs to food banks across the region (Photo courtesy Sean Smith)

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**MIDDLEBURY, Ind.** - Culver Duck Farms has been raising and processing ducks in Elkhart County for decades. The company has donated more than 600,000 duck eggs to food banks and pantries so far this year, continuing a longstanding commitment to supporting communities where the company operates.

Today, Culver Duck Farms has about 260 employees and is the only American Humane Certified duck meat farm in the United States. The company raises ducks on family farms across the region.

Inside INdiana Business spoke with General Manager Sean Smith about the changing duck industry, food insecurity, technology and sustainability.

This interview has been edited for clarity and length.

### **How has the duck industry changed during your time at Culver Duck Farms?**

I've been with the company for 10 years, and in the short amount of time I've been here, the industry has changed. Duck has become more popular over that time. We've started crossing over competitors in a lot more areas, which is certainly good for the end users. As far as duck is concerned, it's not a commodity like chicken or turkey, but a lot more people are seeking it out as an alternative protein.



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**Where are Culver Duck's farms located, and what does your farm network look like?**

We have farms up to about 65 miles away from the processing facility here in Middlebury. We are contracted with a lot of Amish farm families. Most people think of factory farming but most of our farms are much smaller than what most people think of when they think of large livestock operations.

**What are some of the biggest cost pressures facing the business right now?**

Like everything else, it continues to go up. We're not special and we can't avoid those things. No matter what market it is, whether it's the food industry or any other industry, transportation costs continue to rise. Commodity costs for feed continue to go up slightly. Labor costs are also up. Trying to stay competitive and keep good people in your facilities and working with you. That's definitely always been a challenge.

**What are you doing to attract and retain workers?**

It's still challenging, especially where we're located. Our area is very heavily populated with the RV industry. When they are doing well, it is difficult to compete with them. However, we've worked really hard to

create a very good culture. Also, we don't have traditional layoffs like the RV industry does, so it definitely comes with a little bit more stability.

### **How is technology being used across Culver Duck's operations?**

Here at our processing facility, technology comes a little bit more into play as we continue to look for ways to automate certain processes. And that doesn't mean eliminating labor but more in assisting, making jobs a little less physically strenuous and making sure that we're being as consistent as possible within our facilities.

As far as the farms, it's a little bit more of a challenge when you're dealing with the Amish community as far as technology is concerned. But we're using AI technology to help us anticipate things a lot better and giving that information to our Amish farm families and helping them do the best job that they possibly can in raising the ducks.

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Story Continues Below

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### **What steps has Culver Duck taken to make its operations more sustainable?**

In 2013, Culver partnered with another company to have an anaerobic digester built. So the offals and duck innards that aren't necessarily

used, along with other co-feeds from other food companies around the region, go into an anaerobic digester. It creates methane gas. The methane gas is burned by three generators, which in turn create electricity that we sell back to the local power grid. We generate enough electricity every day to power 100 houses.

### **What have you learned from working with food banks and pantries in the communities you serve?**

In light of the current state of the economy, we're hearing from food banks that are even further away than what we traditionally deal with. I'm not talking about cross-country but definitely a little bit more out of our local region here. So every chance we get, we try to help with what we're able to.

### **Why has supporting food banks been important to Culver Duck?**

Donating to local food banks has been a regular practice at Culver. Being an agriculture firm, it only makes sense to give back to the communities as much as we possibly can. Especially when there is a dire need in a lot of places for a protein-rich product like duck eggs or even duck meat from time to time.

### **How does Culver Duck's duck egg operation work?**

Well we do sell eggs. We don't currently sell anything retail-wise, so it's not as obvious. So we do sell duck eggs but we have more eggs than we sell. Those eggs that we do sell are simply just more eggs than we currently need for setting to hatch.

**What role do you think food companies can play in addressing food insecurity?**

The roles are almost endless. The numbers get published every year about how much food is wasted in this country. There are plenty of opportunities for businesses of all sizes to help minimize food insecurity in their communities and across the country. We definitely have a responsibility as food companies to do our part. Agriculture is ultimately about feeding people and the donations allow us to do exactly that right here in Indiana and surrounding communities.

**How does Culver Duck engage with the communities where it operates?**

We definitely like to be as involved as we can in our local communities, whether it's here in Middlebury directly, or in Elkhart or Lagrange counties, where a lot of our farms are located. Whether that's through involvement in a volunteer capacity or donating to a local festival and helping them to have a successful event as well. We

have always felt that it's important to give back to the communities in which we operate.

**What do you think makes duck an appealing alternative to other types of protein?**

Well, it's high in protein. It gives you a different experience. I like to call duck the steak of the poultry world. A duck breast will be very similar in texture to a steak, yet it's not as expensive as beef currently is. So for somebody looking to do something different, duck is the way to go.

It's not as affordable as most people would buy chicken but it's not as expensive as beef, so it's a nice alternative.

**What are your priorities for Culver Duck's next stage of growth?**

Solidifying our labor force, continuous improvement and trying to anticipate the needs of our clients and future clients. What can we do to make everybody want to seek duck out as an alternative protein?

Many people believe that duck is difficult to prepare, so continuing to educate end users on why duck should be a part of your diet, whether it's as a consumer or as a restaurateur looking to do something different on their menu.