

Meat Producer Dover Focus Group Meeting Notes- 1/26/17

This summary reflects a range of views expressed on the issues as discussed during the focus group meeting of meat producers and processor. They do not reflect the formal or public position of any one group of people, organization or coalition. All errors and omissions are the sole responsibility of EMC.

Attendees: 7 including beef, poultry, pork, goat, sheep producers plus
2 meat processors

A challenge the producers face is when individual customers, restaurants or institutions only want to purchase particular cuts of meat. The producers are then faced with figuring out how to sell all the rest of the cuts of meat that are not as sought after. The problem is that profit margins are narrow and producers often lose money if they don't sell most-to-all of the animal at the same time. One producer mentioned not wanting to be big enough to try and sell piece by piece and made the decision to only sell whole animals. While all producers preferred selling the whole animal, some sold piece by piece, some only whole animals, and some both.

One producer suggested that to make selling piece by piece more economically viable, the NH producers would benefit from a distribution network. If the producers sold to a distributor, that distributor would be responsible for then selling to different markets.

The processor mentioned that their business has a butcher shop and that they buy animals from their clients to sell in their store. They also have customers who come to them expressing their interest in buying a whole or half animal and the processor will connect their producer clients with interested buyers.

All producers agreed they can't compete on price with industrial sized operations in other parts of the country. They also agreed that most people buy meat based on price and picking up cheaper meat in the grocery store is not only more economical, it's also convenient. The producers do not believe there are readily available measures that can be undertaken to significantly reduce the cost of production. As a result, they rely on educating a small cross-section of consumers who are willing to pay more because they appreciate buying a better product from a local producer. All the producers value raising fresh, local meat.

Most the producers agreed that the local movement has helped generate interest in buying local meat. Customers who want to support local farms are often willing to pay a premium. Interestingly, several producers agreed that the customers were often not neighbors of the farm, but people traveling from further away to buy New Hampshire raised meat. Some producers have customers who travel from Massachusetts to buy their meat.

The producers think it would be beneficial to better educate restaurant buyers on the benefits of buying local meat and why it is worth paying a bit more for that locally raised meat. Often restaurants want to pay bottom dollar and this makes it difficult to sell to restaurants and make a profit. Some producers sell to restaurants, even though they make less, because their farm's name gets on the menu and it is a way to market their meat to a broader customer base. The producers discussed their desire to be able to sell whole animals to restaurants, not just particular cuts.

All the producers slaughter animals in the fall. The sheep and pork producers also slaughter their animals throughout the year. The pork producer noted that pigs grow well during the winter months. All the producers have their own trailers to transport their animals to the processor of their choice. They all agree that in order to slaughter in the fall, they need to schedule their appointments well in advance (in some cases dates are picked a year in advance). What does not sell right away stays in the freezer over the winter and will then hopefully sell the following summer during the farmers markets. It was noted that younger families are more concerned with the quality of the meat and want it to be USDA inspected. The producers were split between those that utilize USDA inspected processing facilities and those that are not. The majority of the meat raised is sold direct to customers.

One of the producers raises turkeys. This producer only sells whole birds. Although the producer has the training to slaughter turkeys, the turkeys are processed in a non-USDA inspected facility because it is the only poultry processing facility in the state. The producer would like to use a USDA inspected processor, but does not want to travel to Vermont or Maine. This producer gives up the prospect of selling to restaurants, because the NH processor does not offer USDA inspection, and sticks with direct sales to customers.

The price and quality of grain changed several years back and the quality has direct effects on how the animal develops. It was noted that the price of grain has gone up at the same time that quality of grain has gone down and now there is a need to add supplements to grain. Some producers raised concerns about the soy added to some grain products because they believe it is not good for livestock.

Several producers discussed the need for both part-time seasonal labor and permanent full time employees. It was noted that it is difficult to find workers who are affordable and have a good work ethic. One producer stated that, "having employees is a nightmare" and it was a reason the producer would rather stay small enough so as not to need to rely on additional help. The group talked about whether the local colleges and universities with agriculture programs might be a source of finding seasonal labor.

The processor who attended the meeting said their business was fortunate in that they get and keep their staff and their employees are good quality workers. They are very busy slaughtering September through December. During the summer months they offer

catering services. Diversifying their business has allowed them to keep employees busy throughout the year.

A couple of the producers also said they've had success with their farm business through diversification of products sold and having a good location with a farm stand.

Producers all agreed about the importance of catching your potential customer's attention. Several marketing ideas were brought up: have a webpage, write blogs about what is happening on the farm, post cute animal pictures on Facebook, and host farm days. Some of the producers were not interested in agritourism; some were not opposed. Marketing ideas included: paint a building a new color, create some new sign, do something new and different and all of a sudden you are capturing the attention of new people who have been around all this time. At farmer's markets, not only should you sell frozen meat, but cook up a dish for people to sample at the market and also provide the recipe of that dish to go with the meat they buy. People love being able to taste a sample of the meat they are going to buy and having a new recipe to take home with them.

Producers discussed fencing and that NRCS covers 50% of the cost of perimeter fencing.