

## Meat Producer Focus Group Meeting Notes – Newport 1/12/17

This summary reflects a range of views expressed on the issues as discussed during the focus group meeting of meat producers. 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: 3

The producers raised lamb, beef, pigs and chickens. All three of their operations are in the small producer category. All three operations would be willing to expand if the obstacles to doing so could be overcome. It should be noted that even if each producer expanded their business, they would each still fall under the category of small producer (under 50 animals processed per year). All three farms sell local pasture-raised meat. All the farms have breeding programs and it is very important to them that anything they sell is born and raised in New Hampshire.

When questioned about purchasing yearlings in the spring for purchasing in the fall, one producer commented that it was hard to find local yearlings for sale. The producer also wanted to avoid imposing the stress of long travel in a trailer and preferred a closed herd for quality reasons.

All three of the producers sell direct to consumers; for two of the producers this is currently the only source of sales, the third also sells at farmer's markets. All three producers said that they'd be willing to grow if they knew in advance that their product would be sold. When asked if any of them would be interested in selling to a store the answer was they were concerned about the profit margin when adding a middle person as the margins are already thin. Also stores want consistent product throughout the year and small farms would need to form an aggregate to make this work. And, it is hard to compete against larger businesses – economy of scale. The three producers are more interested in selling to restaurants and possibly other institutions in New Hampshire. One producer mentioned hearing a couple years back about the possibility of creating an aggregate to sell to institutions, but has not heard anything more.

All three producers agreed that marketing is a challenge. The challenges include how to market, the cost of marketing, and the time involved to market their products. One producer expressed wanting assistance in understanding the best ways to sell direct to customers. Two producers said they'd like assistance in marketing their products. All three noted that the expense involved in marketing made it cost prohibitive to do as much as they'd like to do. All three thought it would be great to have a cooperative marketing person, somebody who understands the process and could assist individual producers.

There was a discussion about a NH label for locally raised meat and marketing mechanism that accompanied it as a means to get their farms more widely known

and expand sales. Another idea was for the Dept. of Ag to hold a meat weekend in NH, similar to the maple weekend. There was also a discussion that the local food hub might be a good way to sell some meat except that it is only seeking produce because it was too cost prohibitive to store and then distribute meat. There was a discussion about wanting to develop business relationships with butcher shops so local producers can raise meat and the butcher shop guarantees in advance to buy the whole animal and will market the meat.

All three of the producers slaughter in the fall. One producer said that he'd like more flexibility on when he is able to get his animals slaughtered (still in the fall), but in order to go to his preferred USDA approved facility he understands that he has to schedule a year in advance and stick with the scheduled date. He said he could gain flexibility on timing of slaughter by using a custom cutter, but it is more important for his meat to be USDA approved. One producer explained that to slaughter in the spring would mean getting about 38% in meat whereas waiting until the fall gets 50+% in meat. For this producer to raise meat on a year round basis would involve too much management and there would be less profit, so this is not a business model worth undertaking. Two of the producers use USDA inspected slaughterhouses to process their meat. The other producer uses a non-USDA processor. The one who does not use a USDA processor explains that their customers want to buy meat that has been killed in a low stress way, "humane slaughtering" is an important aspect of her business.

All three producers are interested in a seasonal USDA approved mobile slaughter unit. All three producers would ideally like to slaughter their animals on their farms and have the meat be USDA approved. For the one farmer, it is more important to slaughter on the farm than it is to be USDA approved, but if they could slaughter on the farm and be USDA approved, it would allow them to sell to restaurants and they would like to be able to do so. For the other two producers it is more important that their meat is USDA approved, but if they could be USDA approved and slaughter their meat on the farm, they'd like to do so. By staying on the farm they would cut down on transportation costs, time involved in traveling, and would be able to reduce the stress involved for their animals in traveling. The producers mentioned that processing meat is expensive and that perhaps if there were more processing options (like a mobile unit), perhaps it would lower the cost per animal. They discussed that there are 8 similar sized producers within a 10-15 mile radius and that they could likely create a cooperative model for the purpose of scheduling to slaughter animals within a set time frame.

When questioned about forming a transportation cooperative or cooperating with nearby farms to jointly hire a livestock hauler as a way to reduce costs, one producer raised several concerns. The producer was hesitant to lose control over this stage in the process and thought it would be stressful for the animals to be with a mixed herd and new people.

Another identified challenge is all the laws and regulations – the regulations for selling meat are “so detailed and controlled”. All three producers thought there should be different USDA regulations for smaller operations. The ensuing discussion defined smaller as 25 animals or under. This group thought that meat being sold by the ½ or ¼ should be able to not only go directly to customers but also be packaged by the cut for sale to individuals and sold to restaurants.

All three producers agreed on the importance of having access to land. One producer had enough access to land, but recognized with expanding that more might be necessary. One had enough land for grazing, but needed more for growing hay. The third found access to land as a barrier to growing. This producer discussed that she could really use some grant money to help make land she owns pasture ready. There was a discussion about how NRCS does not have any programs that can help turn a forest into a pasture and that is one of the things that meat producers need help with.

Two UNH Ext classes that all three producers found helpful are Pasture Management and Forage class.

E-mail from a producer who planned to attend and was not able to: we need and would appreciate help in finding a farmer-friendly distributor for our pork. We have two groups which will be ready in April and in May that we are trying to sell (roughly 2,500 pounds in cuts). We are certified organic and produce pork and chicken. Thank you!