

Meat Producer Focus Group Meeting Notes- Tamworth 1/25/17

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: 18 including beef, poultry, pork, goat, sheep, and deer meat producers.

Many producers identified processing as their greatest concern. This included concerns over the quality and price of the processing as well as the difficulty scheduling appointments. A few producers shared poor experiences with processors including getting charged more than was listed on the website, small bits of plastic in the meat, and receiving another producer's product. Some producers commented that they needed a butcher who could hang the animals for a longer time. Other producers commented that the cost of processing was very high and keeps going up.

Although most producers processed animals during several seasons, all agreed that scheduling processing appointments was challenging, especially in the fall. Pork producers commented how scheduling processing appointments was particularly challenging because it is harder to predict with pigs than cows when the animals will be ready for processing.

While producers thought there was a great demand for more processing capacity, they also recognized that opening a new facility would require close to a million dollar investment and would need to process year round to make ends meet. For example, someone considered opening a processing facility in Tamworth but concluded it was not feasible because it would need to process approximately 50 animals a week all year round. In addition, there were concerns over finding skilled labor, especially qualified butchers. Producers noted that sadly, UNH no longer teaches butchery.

One producer raised a question whether having a mobile slaughtering facility would address the need for additional capacity. After slaughtering, the meat would be transported to facilities for processing. There is a similar mobile slaughtering truck currently operating out west.

Another producer wondered whether a seasonal processing plant would meet the need for additional processing capacity in the fall and still be economically viable. The seasonal facility would have the same fixed costs (infrastructure) as a year round facility but would have lower variable costs (ie. labor).

Several processors commented about challenges transporting livestock for processing. These concerns include stress on the animals and cost. Almost all of the producers personally transported their livestock for processing. It was common for the travel time to be 1 to 2 hours and they would like a closer facility to reduce the stress caused by the long travel.

Most of the producers thought hiring a livestock hauler was not a great solution because the livestock were not used to that person and it was expensive. Some producers had their own trailers and others rented from entities such as the Small and Beginning Farmers.

Several producers noted that they typically transport only a few animals at a time and that if it's a couple of hour drive, "there goes your day." In response to a question about collaborating with other farmers to reduce transportation costs, producers raised the stress issue of mixing the herds and bio-security issue (disease).

One producer noted that although collaborative efforts may make sense economically, we need to be mindful that farmers are farmers because they are "independent and want to be left alone." However, in some circumstances it still could be possible to share transportation costs and that may be appealing to some farmers if it saved money.

One producer suggested establishing a service that producers would call to schedule transport and processing together. The service would work with all processors and offer producers multiple options for processing appointments so producers could choose between processors based on price, availability, or quality. The producer believed that someone is providing a similar service in either Vermont or New York.

Poultry producers that also process animals raised the challenge of the high cost of workman's compensation and other insurance. They also raised the problem of finding skilled and experienced labor. The producers commented that UNH programs are focused on dairy, equine and sustainable agriculture, but not livestock.

Several producers also talked about the need for labor, both part-time seasonal labor and permanent full time employees. The producers noted that it would be helpful to be able to locate seasonal labor through temp agencies. The producers emphasized that they need experienced labor for their full-time employees because they need to be hard working people able to operate specialized equipment.

One producer said that other states (ie. Maine) offer seasonal insurance but currently that is not available in NH. Another producer commented that this may be changing soon under proposed legislation currently under consideration.

All producers agreed that 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. 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.

Producers also discussed that they don't have the consistent quantity all year long required to sell to major health food stores such as Whole Foods or restaurant chains. Producers don't have the land base to expand to that great a volume and still won't be able to compete on price.

Producers also discussed the possibility of selling to institutions such as schools and hospitals but one producer pointed out that those institutions were only willing to pay a low price and to the extent they purchased local, they purchased culled dairy cows which are cheaper.

Producers also discussed grass fed beef cooperatives but one producer commented that the price offered had only a small premium over conventionally raised cows.

A few producers questioned whether a food hub would work since many people like to do "one stop shopping." Other producers thought their customers preferred to buy directly from the farmer because that was part of the experience. They also commented that distributors typically take at least 20% and that their financial margins were already narrow.

Most producers thought it would be helpful to have marketing assistance to help educate consumers to appreciate the quality of the product and the value of the product. The marketing campaign could explain why locally produced meat costs more including a breakdown of costs. The marketing campaign could also address the health benefits of locally produced natural meat and how according to some studies you can eat locally produced meat on an affordable budget.

A few producers belonged to NH Made and displayed the signs at Farmer's Markets. They thought consumers appreciated the sign but wished the program could be strengthened with additional marketing and outreach.

A few producers noted that the Department of Agriculture in other states such as Vermont provides more comprehensive services than NH's Department of Agriculture. However, all producers appreciated how much the NH Department of Agriculture is able to accomplish with the limited resources they have.