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A feasibility study for the creation of a meat processing training program in Iowa

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A feasibility study for the creation of a meat processing training program in Iowa

Abstract

The unique needs of Iowa's small meat processors include more educational opportunities. This project explored how to provide additional training to these important rural businesses.

Keywords

Business management distribution and marketing, Market research and feasibility studies, Supply networks

Disciplines

Business Administration, Management, and Operations | Marketing | Meat Science | Operations and Supply Chain Management



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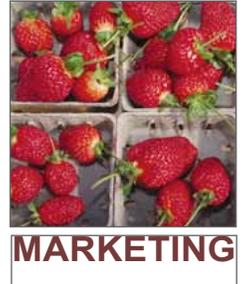
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Budget:

\$7,375 for year one

Q Is it feasible to develop a small meat processing curriculum in Iowa?

A Advancing a small meat processing curriculum in Iowa has the potential to positively impact the viability and number of small meat processing firms in Iowa. Iowa farmers stand to benefit in two ways. Maintaining the current number of firms impacts farmers who raise livestock slated for custom meat markets by making it easier for their animals to be processed close to where they are raised, thus reducing transportation and labor costs. Additionally, farmers negatively impacted by white-tailed deer depredation benefit when deer hunters are able to take their harvested animals to be custom processed, which helps to hold deer herd densities in check.



Background

In 1965 there were more than 450 small meat processing firms operating in Iowa. Today there are around 225 firms processing meat, reflecting the changes in the structure of agriculture and decline in number of farmers on the land raising livestock. (For this project, "small meat processors" refers to slaughter establishments that routinely work directly with livestock producers and will process orders as small as one animal to customer specifications.)

Despite their drop in numbers, small meat processing businesses continue to play a vital role in the state's rural communities. A recent survey of small meat processors, done by the Leopold Center's Small Meat Processors Working Group, indicated there was a need for more highly trained labor within the industry.

The project objectives (core and secondary) were to:

- assess the feasibility of creating a vocational training program for Iowa's small meat processors, with special attention to the finances and stakeholder support for such a program, and
- create a realistic and actionable curriculum as a context for evaluating the success of the training program.

Approach and methods

When the investigators began work, the expectation was that the training program would be facilitated by the state's community colleges. After an initial investigation, it was apparent that in the current economic climate, such a program would fail the feasibility test. The investigators then shifted their approach to:

1. Determine the skills expected of a student who finishes a training program and enters the small meat processing workforce,



2. Create a training program outline,
3. Work with community college representatives to see if and how such a program might fit their academic structure,
4. Survey 20 to 30 Iowa meat processors to gauge the technical and financial feasibility of the program,
5. Return to 2 and 3 as necessary, and
6. Ascribe costs to the finalized curriculum.

Results and discussion

The determination of feasibility was based upon the level of stakeholder support and the financial practicality of the program. After they surveyed 23 small meat processors and calculated startup costs, the project team determined the training program was highly feasible. Stakeholder support was evident throughout the project, but outside capital will be needed to get the program up and running.

The training program framework developed by the project team was divided into two tracks: a tactile hands-on series and a business management series. The courses in the actual working series could be taught primarily by a retired meat processor in abattoirs of plants around the state. The classes in the business management section could be conducted by several small business development organizations.

Conclusions

Small meat processors have provided important services to Iowans for many years. The proposed program could help make the meat processing industry more sustainable. The curriculum framework created by this project is not the only one to design a meat specialist training program—it is simply one option that has the potential to work in Iowa. The program is feasible because the stakeholders can support it and projected costs are reasonable. As Iowa's population changes, a future program could include an emphasis on non-English speakers or on establishing cooperative business networks among processors.

With only one exception, the core stakeholders associated with this project expressed significant support for the efforts. Members of the Iowa Meat Processors Association expressed support at several meetings and in a phone survey. Representatives from the ISU Meat Laboratory favored the project, attending stakeholder meetings and offering considerable input to the plan. Iowa community college representatives offered support and assistance as needed.

The Small Business Development Center (SBDC) has the potential to offer courses on-line and at locations around the state to enhance the business knowledge of small meat processors. Much-needed financial support for workplace and technical training possibly could come from Iowa Workforce Development. The Center for Industrial Research and Service (CIRAS) at ISU is another possibility for offering business management training that would benefit small meat processors.



Impact of results

The results of the project could have considerable impact on agricultural and rural community resilience in Iowa. A training program that strengthens the vitality of the state's rural meat processing industry also supports diversity in agricultural operations at the local level. The results can be used by policy makers, small meat processors and others directly involved with the industry. Given the current economic climate in Iowa there are no efforts underway to pursue the project, although those involved with the study will be watching for opportunities to reemerge.

Education and outreach

Two presentations were made on the project as it progressed. Phil Damery, a graduate student in sustainable agriculture at Iowa State, reported on the project and draft curriculum to the Iowa Meat Processor Association in February 2010. Another presentation was given at the Marketing and Food Systems Initiative workshop in April 2010. Damery and Betty Wells of the ISU sociology department are at work on a paper on the role small meat processors play in resilient rural communities.

Leveraged funds

No additional funds were leveraged by this grant.

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