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

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 harvested animals to be custom processed, which helps to hold deer herd densities in check.

What was done and why?

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. 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.

What did we learn?

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.