

Processing Plants as Community Resources

COVID-19 Shows Just how Vulnerable Consolidated, Corporate Meatpacking is

By Jim & LeeAnn VanDerPol

Many small and medium-size farms are trying to survive by selling meats directly to retail customers and restaurants. The idea shows promise as a way to revitalize an economy otherwise in the shadow of huge agricultural enterprises. We need slaughterhouses; several good, new up-to-date buildings should be placed throughout Minnesota to serve the growing number of farm meat-marketing businesses (*see sidebar*). These should be incubators of new business, attracting people who wish to operate meat processing businesses and equipping them with the knowledge and skills to build new businesses.

These incubators must feature handling along the humane lines suggested by animal scientist Temple Grandin, the “livestock whisperer.” This will keep the adrenaline down in the animals, make the work easier, and win the approval of many customers who tend to be easily conflicted by the idea of animal slaughter. They must be of a size and quality to compare favorably with Big Meat. They must be, as much as possible, pleasant places to work and safe workplaces, above all else. Pay must be adequate. The several that slaughter hogs should be capable of handling perhaps 500 to 1,000-head per week.

Lines should be discouraged in favor of teamwork. Line speeds, if lines are used, must be under strict state control. They should feature some in-house further processing, but they need to have slaughter capacity in excess of their processing — processing can proceed separately from slaughter and it is another worthwhile human activity we should encourage, scattered about in rural Minnesota.

Care must be taken to supplement, not replace, current private capacity. But our small processing capacity is getting old and shutting down. State officials could visit the facilities operated by the Lorentz brothers in Cannon Falls, Minn., to see a good example of what could happen. It is badly needed economic development. This is not cheap processing. It is good processing. The time is right.

The state should build and retain ownership of these abattoirs. These state-owned

abattoirs could be built with bonding funds. The meat processor associations can run apprentice programs in them that should encourage those who desire to and are able to operate processing to come forward. The facilities could be leased to operators. There should be a close working relationship with meat science experts at the University of Minnesota and the Agricultural Utilization Research Institute. The state’s retaining of ownership could guarantee that certain standards of humane slaughter and good work conditions are maintained as a minimum.

This would:

- enable badly needed access to quality processing for farmer-marketers;
- serve as an incubator and boost for people wanting to enter processing;
- build business-based prosperity in central and western Minnesota;
- allow for a much wider variety of farms, increasing numbers of viable farms, especially small farms;
- encourage farms that want to market directly or through relationships to people in rural and urban areas;
- increase urban understanding of rural issues, and rural understanding of urban issues, by highlighting the communication skills that go with closely held marketing businesses;

- diversify agriculture and farming, potentially increasing the possibility of better care of the Earth;
- encourage development of small processing businesses, holding out the possibility of “family heirloom” sausages that people would drive out from the Twin Cities to buy;
- stabilize and support rural schools;
- stabilize and support main street businesses.

Currently, we have a food supply controlled by giant companies that are increasingly crippled by the COVID-19 pandemic. We must not reconcile ourselves to one meat plant or one cannery or one fresh vegetable warehouse system controlling as much as 5% of the product flow, which is the situation we had when Smithfield’s pork plant in Sioux Falls, S. Dak., became a COVID-19 hotspot. It is dangerous. We really don’t yet know how dangerous.

The best way to come out in a different place is to make a different first step, a step for people, communities, and livestock. Rural Minnesota needs it. Individual farmers and others have already done the difficult work of developing the ideas of direct marketing, consumer connection, and creating relationships in business. The idea is growing. The time is now for the state to throw its shoulder to the wheel. We urge action. □

LeeAnn and Jim VanDerPol, along with their family, own and operate Pastures A Plenty Farm in Kerkhoven in western Minnesota. The farm raises hogs and other livestock and markets direct to consumers.

Survey: Lack of Processing Hobbling Local Meat Production

A survey of Minnesota livestock producers shows that the state has a growing local meat industry, but lack of small-scale processing capacity is threatening to undermine it.

This survey was developed by a team of farmers and staff from the Land Stewardship Project, the Sustainable Farming Association of Minnesota, the Minnesota Farmers Union, the Minnesota Farmers’ Market Association, Renewing the Countryside, and the Minnesota Institute for Sustainable Agriculture. It was sent to participating groups’ members in mid-May.

Survey results, largely from farmers who direct market their livestock to consumers, restaurants, and food cooperatives, confirmed what agriculture groups and others have known for a long time: farmers are

experiencing a shortage of local livestock processing, made worse by COVID-19 plant closures, and this is limiting their farm businesses.

Well over half of the 111 survey respondents reported that there were too few livestock processing operations to meet farmers’ needs. Even before the pandemic, processing was inadequate, according to 64% of the respondents. A majority of respondents, 54%, indicated that they would raise more livestock if there was more processing available.

What’s particularly frustrating about the backlog in local processing is that 65% of the survey respondents have seen an increase in demand for their products.

More on the survey is at www.misa.umn.edu/resources/local-food-sales-resources/livestock/livestock-processing.