

Coordinated support and consumer preferences spell success for Iowa's small meat processors

Small meat processors in Iowa have never had a greater opportunity for success than they have today, according to Joe Cordray, extension meat specialist. To support his statement, Cordray cites industry support generated by the Small Meat Processors Working Group and shifts in consumer preferences. The working group, organized by ISU rural sociology graduate student Arion Thiboumery and Cordray three years ago, brings processors, regulators, educators, and business consultants to a discussion table where they identify small meat processor needs and the resources to address those needs.

Clint Smith recalls it was much different when he and Shelle bought the Stanhope Locker five years ago. They had no background in meat processing, but had confidence as they purchased the well established business with good product reputation and solid employee base. But the positive aspects of the locker and their years of business experience just weren't enough when they needed to make facility renovations and tried to locate contractors familiar with the meat processing industry.

"It was a struggle finding contractors that knew all the little peculiarities of the industry and ones that could help us meet all the regulations," said Smith. "We had the support of the previous owner for several months, but it wasn't until Arion came along and invited us to be part of the working group that we saw the right hand and left hand of the meat industry come together for us – for all small meat processors."

In setting up the working group, Thiboumery identified three meat processors that wanted to expand or remodel their facilities and invited them to be members. The meat processors sat at the table with the Iowa Meat and Poultry Inspection Bureau Chief - Iowa Department of Agriculture and Land Stewardship, representatives from Iowa Department of Economic Development and Farm Bureau, specialists from Iowa State University Extension Value Added Ag Program, Center for Industrial Research and Service (CIRAS) and Meat Science Extension, and experts from the Drake University Agricultural Law Center and the Leopold Center for Sustainable Agriculture at ISU.

"The working group was a huge blessing for us coming into the industry green," Smith said. "By explaining our needs to the people with the resources, we were finally able to make connections that support small meat processors."



Those connections are documented in the Iowa Meat Processors Resource Guide Book, a manual created as a direct result of the working group discussions. It includes information related to upgrading or expanding a meat plant, business planning and feasibility, rules and regulations, plant design and construction and labor. It is a great reference for new meat processors as they prepare to work with regulators says working group member Dr. Gary Johnson, Iowa Meat and Poultry Inspection Bureau Chief.

“As the working group developed projects, I have been able to provide regulatory input such as references to construction and food safety guide lines for the resource book,” Johnson said. “This reference book serves as a common starting point for processors and regulators as they begin working together.”

Working group discussions prompted Meat Science Extension to team with CIRAS and the Value Added Agriculture program to offer local and area trainings on business sustainability, as well as educational sessions at the Iowa Meat Processors Association Annual Convention. These opportunities, supported in part by the Value Chain Partnerships project and the Leopold Center, are expanding the meat processors business savvy – helping them understand customer preferences, products marketing, succession planning, and develop and use accounting systems.

“We have broadened the scope of our interaction with meat processors – by expanding our meat product, processing and food safety education to include issues of business development and sustainability,” said Cordray. “Traditionally, this group has run businesses out of their back pockets. We want them to be successful. We want to see the industry continue, so we are helping them work smarter, not harder.”

He identifies three market segments that currently use the small meat processors – niche meat producers, consumers wanting to buy meat from locally raised animals, and producers butchering meat for their own use. “Twenty-five years ago a small meat processor wouldn’t have thought of catering; today a majority have catering as part of their business. They are beginning to be more than just meat cutters – they are developing business minds, recognizing market opportunities and marketing their products and services, in part because they don’t have to struggle to find the resources to make it happen.”

“It wasn’t until Arion came along and invited us to be part of the small meat processor working group that we saw the right hand and left hand of the meat industry come together for us – for all small meat processors.”

- *Clint Smith, owner Stanhope Locker*

For more information about the Small Meat Processors Working Group contact:

Arion Thiboumery, graduate assistant, 515-294-2882, arion@iastate.edu

Joe Cordray, Meat Science Extension specialist, 515-294-4266, jcordray@iastate.edu

March 2009

... and justice for all The U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) prohibits discrimination in all its programs and activities on the basis of race, color, national origin, gender, religion, age, disability, political beliefs, sexual orientation, and marital or family status. (Not all prohibited bases apply to all programs.) Many materials can be made available in alternative formats for ADA clients. To file a complaint of discrimination, write USDA, Office of Civil Rights, Room 326-W, Whitten Building, 14th and Independence Avenue, SW, Washington, DC 20250-9410 or call 202-720-5964. Cooperative Extension Service, Iowa State University of Science and Technology, and the United States Department of Agriculture cooperating.