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A Beginner's Guide to Local Meat Processing

Lauren Gwin
Oregon State University

Kathryn Quanbeck
Oregon State University

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Abstract

This article describes the Beginner's Guide to Local Meat Processing—a tool created by the national Niche Meat Processor Assistance Network (NMPAN) as an introduction to a complex topic. Increased consumer and producer interest in local meat and poultry has resulted in requests for Cooperative Extension, public agencies, economic development districts, nonprofit organizations, and other support organizations to participate in or lead efforts to build, expand, or enhance local processing. The guide, backed by NMPAN, is intended to improve the effectiveness of such efforts by providing a window on the complex economic, regulatory, operational, and market conditions and context in which meat processors operate.

Lauren Gwin
Director, Niche Meat
Processor Assistance
Network
Assistant Professor,
Crop and Soil Science
Lauren.gwin@oregonstate.edu

Kathryn Quanbeck
Program Manager,
Niche Meat Processor
Assistance Network
kaquanbeck@gmail.com

Oregon State
University
Corvallis, Oregon

Introduction and Background

Since the 1980s, steadily growing interest in local, sustainably raised meat and poultry has prompted a call for more processing facilities. And that call grows louder in times of low commodity livestock prices, as producers seek higher prices for their animals. However, unlike other types of local foods, meat and poultry require a significant, highly regulated processing step to turn live animals into packaged, saleable product. Degrees of processing and regulations vary by product, target market, and other factors, but nonetheless are complex.

Livestock producers, when they experience challenges with processing (challenges related to distance, scheduling, services, cutting quality, and so on), often conclude that a new facility should be built. At the same time, many small-scale processors struggle to stay in business (relevant challenges are discussed extensively in Gwin, Thiboumery, & Stillman, 2013; see Frimmer, 2015, for a regional illustration).

Extension professionals, along with public agencies, economic development districts, nonprofit organizations, and similar entities can find themselves in the middle of this complex puzzle, asked to support or lead efforts to build or expand local processing. They are typically recruited because of their significant expertise in one or more of the links in the local meat and poultry value chain (e.g., livestock production, niche marketing, meat science). Yet the processing link can be a "black box": Without an understanding of the complex economic, regulatory, and operational conditions in which meat processors, especially small-scale facilities, operate, Extension professionals often have difficulty advising their clientele.

In 2008, we created the Niche Meat Processor Assistance Network (NMPAN) as a peer learning forum and information hub focused on meat and poultry processing for local, niche markets. We explicitly use a value-chain approach to connect those with expertise across all links of the chain. Our network operates as a community of practice that includes meat processors, butchers, farmers and ranchers, distributors, retailers, public agencies, Extension, nonprofits, and others working to support and strengthen this sector. NMPAN has become a trusted, credible resource and forum, both nationally and internationally.

The Case for a Beginner's Guide

Extension professionals regularly assist clientele and communities with challenges, market opportunities, requests for information, and other offerings that require stretching beyond their expertise. This situation often requires bringing in colleagues and external partners and finding relevant research and other resources to apply locally.

NMPAN provides a link to Extension colleagues and other partners who have expertise related to local meat processing, along with a comprehensive array of applied research, technical reports, case studies, and other education and outreach resources (e.g., Campbell, 2014; Dickenson, Joseph, & Ward, 2013; Holcomb, Flynn, & Kenkel, 2012; McCann, 2014; Thiboumery, 2009). However, not everyone can take the time to dig into these resources. Consequently, we identified a clear need for a concise, user-friendly guide about the basics of local meat processing that Extension professionals and others could use to bring themselves and their clientele up to speed quickly. After hearing from many Extension professionals, nonprofits, funders, and public agencies, including during a 2014 tour with U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) Rural Development western state directors, we conducted a more formal needs assessment to confirm interest and identify priority subtopics.

In October 2014, we sent an online Qualtrics questionnaire to those on a national list that included Cooperative Extension agents, public agencies, nonprofit organizations, and support businesses likely to be involved with some aspect of the local meat value chain. Thirty-seven percent of respondents ($n = 87$) were from Cooperative Extension or other university positions; 13% were in state or federal agencies; 16% were from nonprofits; and 9% were in associated businesses (e.g., consultants, insurers). The other 25% were producers or processors themselves. Respondents were based in 32 of the 50 states, from all U.S. regions.

Ninety-six percent of all respondents said they received questions or requests for information related to meat and poultry processing, with 42% of that 96% receiving such requests "all the time." When we asked what type of information would help them answer those questions, providing a list of five topics, respondents essentially said "yes, please": Each of the five was selected by at least two thirds of respondents:

- building markets for local meat and poultry (81%);
- local meat value chains—production, processing, distribution, marketing (80%);
- meat processing regulations (78%);
- feasibility, business planning, and design for new processing facilities (70%); and
- mobile slaughter and processing (67%).

The Finished Guide

With our hunch confirmed, we developed a pilot "crash course" in 2015 and field tested it in educational sessions at several national conferences. We used participant feedback to revise the course into four short, easy-to-read fact sheets, which we then had peer reviewed, for both content and ease of use, by a small group of content experts and practitioners.

We published the revised guide on the NMPAN website in fall 2016

(<http://www.nichemeatprocessing.org/beginners-guide-to-local-meat-processing>). The four one-page, double-sided parts are as follows:

- What Is Local Meat Processing? (http://www.nichemeatprocessing.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/08/CrashCourseOne.Final_revised_8.13.pdf) describes the steps involved in meat processing, from slaughter to value-added processing.
- What Are the Rules? (http://www.nichemeatprocessing.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/08/CrashCourseTwo.Final_revised_10.1.pdf) covers federal and state-level regulations and types of activities allowed by each.
- Small Plant Economics (http://www.nichemeatprocessing.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/08/CrashCourseThree.Final_revised_8.31.pdf) explains the costs and associated throughput needed for a small-scale meat processing facility to break even and be profitable.
- New Plant Checklist (http://www.nichemeatprocessing.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/08/CrashCourseFour.Final_revised_8.31.pdf) identifies 10 questions that must be answered before trying to build a new, USDA-inspected meat processing facility.

We distributed the guide nationally through our network and with help from partner organizations and agencies. According to web usage data, it is in wide circulation: At this writing, the guide had been viewed nearly 2,200 times in the preceding 60 days, with an average of 1,000 views per month.

Early reactions have been very positive. An agricultural professional in California wrote, "I wish I had had this when I was first getting started." Additionally, the guide already has been cited in a 2016 feasibility study in California (Greenway Partners, 2016).

We encourage Extension professionals to use the guide and share it with clientele and partners. NMPAN, as a national forum for peer learning and an information hub, is open and available to those seeking more in-depth information.

Author Note

Kathryn Quanbeck was NMPAN program manager during the preparation of the Beginner's Guide to Local Meat Processing. She has since left NMPAN for another position.

Acknowledgments

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