



# LOCAL MEAT AND POULTRY

From high-end restaurants to quick-service chains, from small local grocers and farmers' markets to large retail stores, hospitals, and corporate cafeterias, businesses are responding to consumer demand for meat, poultry and eggs produced by farmers and ranchers in their region. Even schools—from Colorado to coastal Maine—are finding ways to get local meat onto school lunch menus.

The support for local animal products should not be surprising given the value that animal agriculture can bring to communities.

Animals can provide nutrients for cropland or make productive use of land where crops don't grow well. Grazing pasture provides open space and vistas. Farmers and ranchers can see higher revenues when they process their animals locally. A [study](#) of beef cattle producers in six New England states found that those selling locally had more control over their marketing decisions and received a higher price for their product than those selling to buyers outside their region. The local producers also reported that customer demand outpaced supply, suggesting a market opportunity for additional producers.

But even when demand is high, getting into the market is not always easy. There are many



## FAST FACTS

- In 2010, USDA's Food Safety and Inspection Service launched the Small Plant Help Desk to connect small and very small meat, poultry and egg processors with USDA specialists. In its first two years, the Desk responded to over 4,500 inquiries.
- Since mid-2011, USDA rules allow state-inspected slaughter plants to apply to ship their meat across state lines, helping producers access lucrative markets in neighboring states.

steps between the rancher and the dinner table, including facilities that slaughter, butcher, package, and distribute meat as well as render or otherwise dispose of waste. Over the years, the number of facilities offering these services has shrunk and the size of the remaining operations has grown, a phenomenon known as [consolidation](#). For example, the total number of Federally-inspected livestock



slaughterhouses experienced a net decrease between 1990 and 2010, falling nationwide from over 1,200 in the early 1990s to approximately 800 in 2010.<sup>7</sup> Large plants now slaughter the vast majority of our meat and are highly mechanized—requiring animals to be a uniform size and shape—or take animals only from producers with whom they have signed contracts. Smaller independent producers may not be able to access these facilities, while small processors struggle to compete with them.

Public misunderstanding about livestock processing can make it hard to site local processing facilities, while seasonal fluctuations in supply can impact the facilities' cash flow. Financing may be difficult, as is compliance with food safety and environmental regulations. The result is that in some areas, despite

consumer demand and producer interest in selling livestock locally, the market does not develop because supply-chain challenges are too great. Yet successful small slaughterhouses have strong economic potential: in addition to providing producers with marketing options, an [Iowa State University study](#) found that small slaughterhouses in Iowa created over 7 jobs per 1,000 cattle processed.

#### **ON THE GROUND: KYF AND LOCAL MEAT AND POULTRY**

USDA has heard from stakeholders that a lack of processing options is a major barrier for farmers and ranchers looking to serve their regional market. To respond, USDA needed to improve its understanding of the problem, find ways to increase outreach and technical assistance to small processors, and support

diverse approaches to improving slaughter capacity. In 2009, staff from seven USDA agencies involved in meat and poultry issues came together under the auspices of the Know Your Farmer, Know Your Food initiative to coordinate this work. The results include:

#### **Gaining a better understanding of the industry.**

Through KYF, USDA's Food Safety and Inspection Service (FSIS) gathered data and developed a series of maps to illustrate possible problem areas and guide producers, businesses and governments as they make policy and investment decisions. The [maps](#) and accompanying [report](#) can be used to identify areas with high concentrations of small producers and few slaughter facilities.

#### **Helping more producers access processors.**

Producers can find USDA-inspected processing



# CASE STUDY

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## Local Meat Processing on the Move

When the New Entry Sustainable Farming Project in Lowell, Massachusetts wanted to help beginning farmers earn a steady, reliable source of income and improve the quality of their soil, chickens were the logical choice.

Chickens take only six to eight weeks to grow from chicks to full-sized birds, so producers can earn income quickly and with reduced risk.

Unfortunately, Massachusetts has no USDA-inspected processing facilities, leaving producers with few ways to get their birds to consumers. A poultry producer herself, New Entry's director Jennifer Hashley knew the challenges of the poultry market. So New Entry partnered with the New England Small Farm Institute to propose a mobile poultry processing unit, which travels from farm to farm to process birds.

With funding from the **Sustainable Agriculture Research and Education program**, administered by USDA's National Institute of Food and Agriculture, the groups brought together state and local officials to develop a process for licensing and regulating the mobile units. Shortly thereafter, USDA's Food Safety Inspection Service released **guidance documents** on mobile meat and poultry processing to assist other states in drafting these kinds of regulations.

Hashley's group first built an open-air unit that was used by 8 different producers during the first three years of the pilot. With the help of an RBEG from USDA Rural

Development, a larger, enclosed unit was built for use in all kinds of weather. Now dozens of producers are using the mobile unit and at least 8 others have developed their own on-farm facilities under the state licensing process.

To ensure that producers using the mobile unit are properly trained, New Entry secured a second grant from USDA's **SARE** program to develop trainings that cover food safety and business model development. The group also built an **economic calculator** to help producers estimate costs and revenues.

The results of the project have been significant for farmers, consumers and the community:

- **Increased revenues.** Producers accessing the mobile units generally produce between 400 and 2,000 birds per season and can charge between \$4 and \$7/lb for fresh, local, pasture-raised, and/or organic poultry. They can gross up to \$30,000 per year through direct marketing.
- **Consumer access.** Processed local birds have become more widely available in the state.
- **Jobs.** Processing poultry requires 5 to 10 workers during the season. With dozens of producers now using the mobile plant, job opportunities in processing have increased.

**Sam Anderson and Jennifer Hashley of New Entry Sustainable Farming Project in Lowell, Massachusetts and a colleague celebrate a mobile poultry processing facility built with support from USDA.**



facilities near them using the [Meat, Poultry and Egg Product Inspection Directory](#), which is updated monthly by FSIS. In response to user feedback, the Excel version of the directory can now be sorted by state, city and zip code. It is the most downloaded item on the FSIS website, with over a million downloads between October 2010 and September 2011.

[Mobile Slaughter Units](#), self-contained slaughter facilities that can travel from farm to farm, can serve multiple small producers in areas where large plants might be unaffordable. (See [this example](#) from Washington State.) USDA received feedback that the rules governing mobile units were vague, hampering their development. FSIS clarified these requirements and issued [guidance documents](#) for mobile meat and poultry operations. Together with USDA Rural Development, FSIS also held webinars on mobile meat and poultry processing (available [here](#) and [here](#)) and reached hundreds of interested producers and processors at conferences, including in [Fort Collins, CO](#) and [Carson City, NV](#). A [webpage](#) from the Small Meat Processing Center, a project of [eXtension](#), shows the currently operating mobile slaughter facilities.

Loan and loan guarantee programs, such as Rural Development's Business and Industry Guaranteed Loan Program, help entrepreneurs secure financing for new processing facilities. (Learn more about B&I and small meat processing [here](#)). Grants are also available; for example, in 2011, the Sustainable Farming Association of Minnesota received a Farmers' Market Promotion Program grant from the Department's Agricultural Marketing Service to train farmers in meat inspection rules and educate consumers about local meat.



*A tenth-generation farm, the Carolina Nature Conservancy, run by the Pegues family, uses NRCS support to implement conservation practices on their local grassfed beef operation in South Carolina.*



**SEE THE ISLAND GROWN FARMERS COOPERATIVE'S MOBILE MEAT PROCESSING UNIT.**

[Click here to watch the video](#)



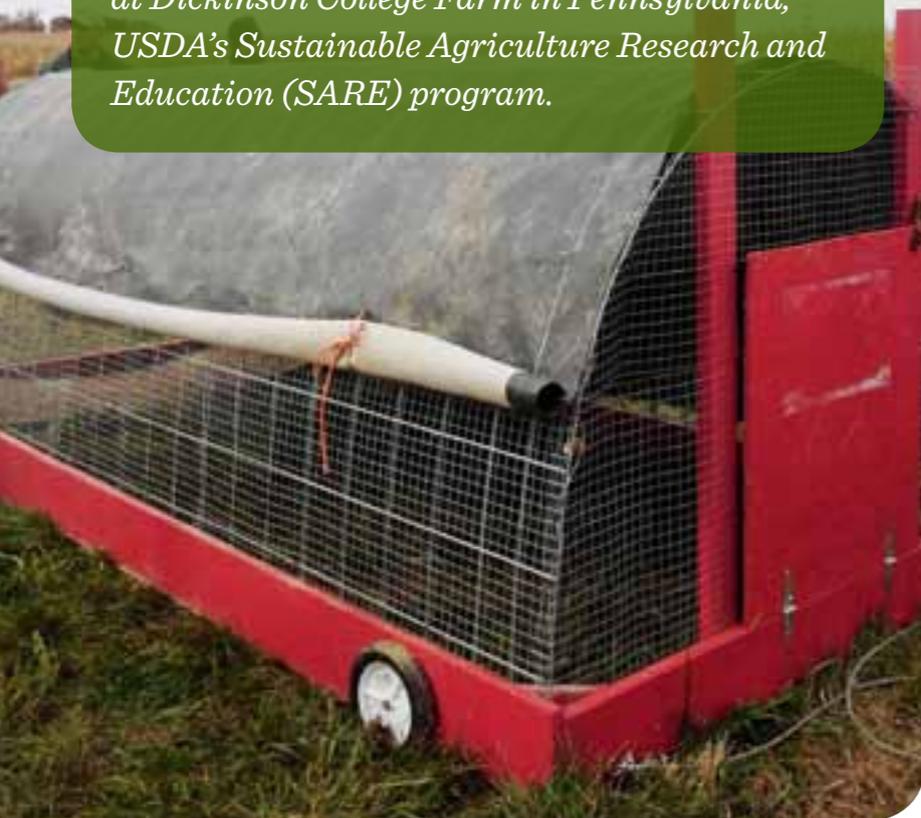
**Helping meat producers succeed.** Some local producers struggle to access processing facilities because of the small volume of animals they raise. USDA supports cooperative production as one way to address this barrier. For example, **research** by the University of Idaho funded by an **Agriculture and Food Research Initiative** grant from USDA's National Institute of Food and Agriculture is examining the best ways to advance production, processing and marketing of livestock from small farms, including through producer cooperatives.

Producers may also choose to raise and market their livestock as "**Grass-Fed**" or "**Certified Organic**." USDA's Natural Resources Conservation Service has resources to support these producers, including assistance in transitioning to organic production and cost-share agreements to help producers implement sustainable grazing management, nutrient management, and other practices. (See how a tenth-generation South Carolina ranching family is using these resources for a local grass-fed beef operation [here](#).) The Agricultural Marketing Service also provides support for operations transitioning to organic through the **Organic Cost-Share Program**.

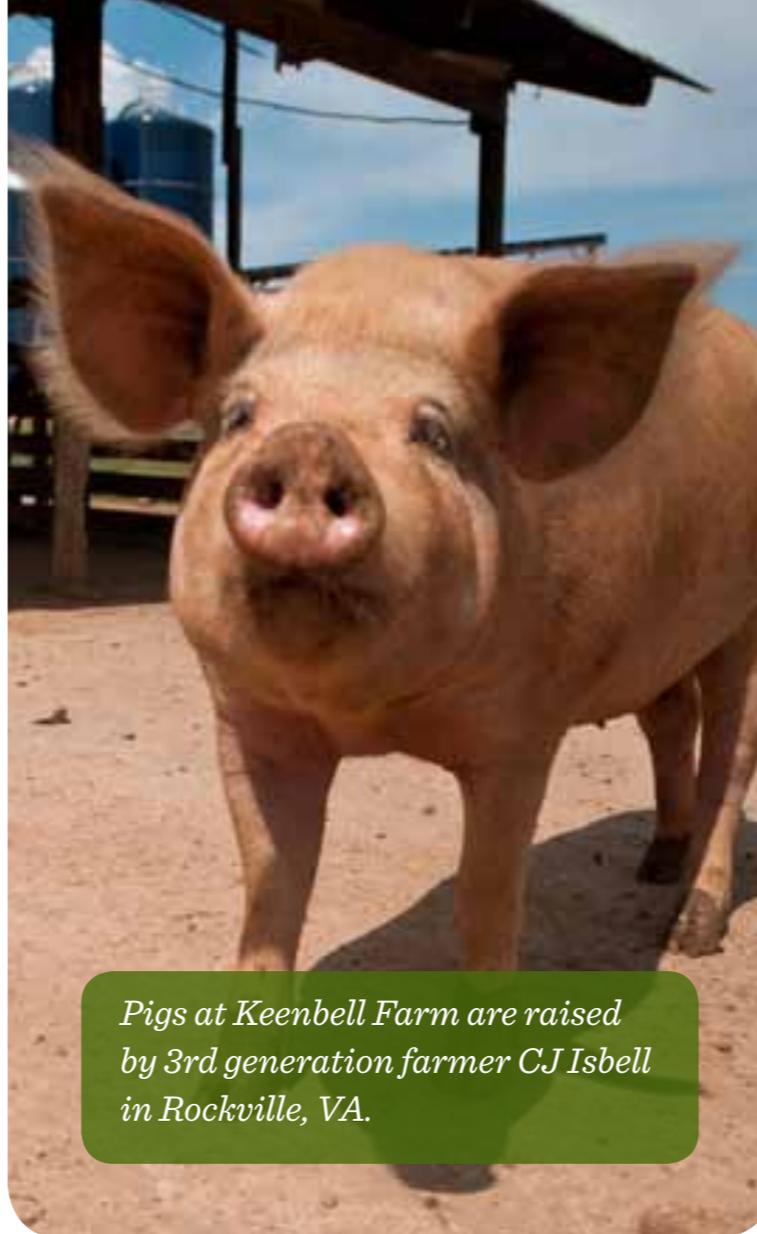
Few people today understand how livestock are raised, perpetuating myths that can be debunked when they visit a farmer or rancher or hear about their practices. Many agricultural groups are developing programs to increase consumer understanding of livestock production. KYF has advanced this goal as well through its **blog** and other outreach efforts.

Finally, for Native American communities, harvesting and consuming traditional animals such as buffalo has important cultural significance. Field-harvesting

*Today's pastured-poultry farmers are building mobile pens using innovative designs to fit a farm's terrain and needs. This one is being used at Dickinson College Farm in Pennsylvania, USDA's Sustainable Agriculture Research and Education (SARE) program.*



of animals is part of that tradition, but getting those animals to inspected slaughter facilities can be difficult. In South Dakota, there are only two USDA-inspected slaughter facilities that process buffalo, which creates a barrier to marketing the meat in stores or selling into the school lunch program. The InterTribal Buffalo Council, which represents 57 tribes in 19 states, is using a **Small Socially Disadvantaged Producer Grant** from USDA Rural Development to train member tribes on maintaining cultural respect in harvesting buffalo



*Pigs at Keenbell Farm are raised by 3rd generation farmer CJ Isbell in Rockville, VA.*

while also delivering the meat to market in a safe and reliable way.

**Helping meat processors succeed.** Small slaughter plants struggle with very different issues than do large plants. For example, they may have trouble meeting food safety requirements without technical assistance. To help address some of these needs, USDA's Food Safety and Inspection Service launched the **Small Plant Help Desk** to connect small and very small meat, poultry and

egg processors with knowledgeable USDA specialists. Demand is great: In 2010 and 2011, its first two years, the Desk responded to over 4,500 inquiries. Additional resources are available at the **FSIS small plants page**.

Research can help both existing and new slaughter facilities adopt best practices to overcome challenges. The **Sustainable Agriculture Research and Education program**, run by USDA's National Institute of Food and Agriculture, is supporting community-based research into the feasibility of developing additional small meat and poultry processing facilities. And several recent awards from NIFA's **National Integrated Food Safety Initiative** support research into new food safety technologies that can be used by small meat and poultry producers and processors.

Finally, many smaller slaughter facilities are inspected by state food safety personnel rather than by federal personnel. Until recently, state-inspected plants were restricted from shipping their products across state lines, even though the inspection checklists were similar for state and federal facilities. This restriction kept some producers from accessing slaughter plants that would allow them to ship into lucrative markets across a border—for example, Wisconsin producers could not ship to Chicago. The 2008 Farm Bill required USDA to develop a program on interstate shipment of meat from state-inspected facilities because of this restriction. FSIS began working with three states to pilot cooperative interstate shipment programs. And since mid-2011, USDA **rules** allow all state-inspected plants to apply to be part of the interstate meat program.

For detailed information on USDA support for local meat and poultry projects, see the **KYF Map**.