



## Ecological Farming Association Soquel, CA

Utilized a rapid assessment instead of a comprehensive feasibility study, saving both time and money while still providing key answers.

### **AMS GRANTS AWARDED**

Local Food Promotion Program (LFPP) 2014, Planning grant for \$25,000

**Project types:** General Market Analysis, Enterprise Planning, Education & Outreach

### **HISTORY OF BUSINESS OR PROJECT**

Based on the shores of the Monterey Bay in Soquel, California, The Ecological Farming Association (Eco-Farm) is a non-profit educational organization whose mission is to nurture safe, healthy, just, and ecologically sustainable farms, food systems, and communities by bringing people together for education, alliance building, advocacy, and celebration.

Founded in 1981 when the first Ecological Farming Conference was held as a small gathering on a farm in Winters, EcoFarm has facilitated the inception and continued development of an ecological and just food and farming system. Their signature program - the Eco-Farm Conference - has grown from just 45 attendees in 1981 to nearly 1,900 today.

Eco-Farm originally proposed hiring a well-known consultant to conduct a comprehensive feasibility study of a multi-species meat slaughterhouse somewhere in the Monterey Bay region (and neighboring counties). Producers in the California central coast region initiated the project with the goal of increasing USDA-inspected processing capacity in the region and wanted to evaluate the economic feasibility of building a new plant.

Eco-Farm asked the Niche Meat Processor Assistance Network (NMPAN) staff for guidance, and they proposed a different, less expensive approach, called a rapid assessment. The rapid assessment report (see below under references) was not only far less expensive and more accurate but also propelled the group forward with more timely, actionable information about a modular, USDA-inspected processing option for pork and poultry. The California Center for Cooperative Development also assisted on the project team by conducting producer surveys and helping with data analysis.

## **WHY THEY CHOSE TO APPLY FOR AN AMS GRANT/WHAT AN AMS GRANT MEANT FOR THEIR BUSINESS/ORGANIZATION?**

Eco-Farm would not have done the study without the support of USDA AMS. Although producers in their region were asking for this research for some time, Eco-Farm simply did not have the staff expertise or resources to address the needs of livestock/poultry producers. This grant kickstarted a multi-year conversation and added some important data and context to the discussions around potential solutions, and allowed producers to network in a more collaborative way.

## **KEY IMPACTS OF THE GRANT, SHORT-TERM AND LONGER-TERM**

According to the Eco-Farm website, the project concluded “there is not sufficient regional production to support a typical full-service slaughter facility. However, a separate analysis points to enough poultry and pork production in the region to support a “Plant in a Box” (PIB) that could be an alternative to a full production USDA inspected facility.” A couple of poultry farmers looked into individually installing a PIB on their properties or going in on one together, but the momentum on that fizzled due to economic constraints, one producer ceasing operations and one farmer not having secured land. Producers in nearby counties of San Mateo and Sonoma have also investigated the PIB alternative, but nobody has been ready to commit.

Some producers surveyed for this study are no longer in business, while other new ones have started. The meat processing space has changed in some key areas over the last few years. It may be time for another study in the next couple of years to see how volume and options may have evolved.

Though a PIB has not been developed in this region, the studies developed through this project provided valuable information on what it would take (animal units, seasonality, labor, etc.) to establish one. An involved grassfed beef producer also stated: “I think the project was useful and there were a lot of connections made in the process.” Producers in the region still struggle to obtain appropriate slaughter dates for their animals and continue to lack the option of USDA-inspected poultry processing.

## **WHERE THEY WOULD LIKE TO GO NEXT**

The report suggested several possible next steps. Eco-Farm has not pursued any of them, however, some independent producers are making strides in some of these directions, particularly around marketing, communication, and securing committed buyers.

Recommendations included:

- Shared transportation: find ways to reduce hauling costs by transporting livestock to processing and meat back with other producers;
- Active scheduling: take advantage of the “slow season” at local processing facilities by adjusting feeding and finishing schedules;
- Organize: work together with other producers to streamline processing, providing steady, reliable throughput to processors. Larger, steadier volumes may allow negotiation on the price of services;
- Increased sales = increased production: expand marketing and distribution to get livestock numbers up. More livestock = more demand for processing services;
- Financial investment: work with local processors to help finance the changes the local industry wants to see;
- Communication: what do you need to improve your relationship with your local processor? What do they need?
- Increased commitment from buyers: just as processors need producer commitment, producers need buyers to commit. How much meat will they buy, at what price, over what period of time? Can producers balance the carcass—sell all the parts—through those sales? Does that translate into viable economics for producers?

## **REFERENCES/LINKS**

<https://eco-farm.org/conference/2016/session/discussion-group-central-coast-meat-producers>

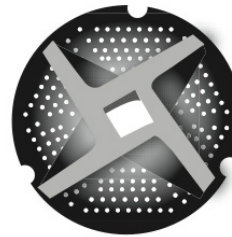
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[https://www.nichemeatprocessing.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/07/Central-Coast-Project-Report-FINAL-Oct.2015\\_0.pdf](https://www.nichemeatprocessing.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/07/Central-Coast-Project-Report-FINAL-Oct.2015_0.pdf)

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**NICHE MEAT PROCESSOR**  
**ASSISTANCE NETWORK**

This case study was created in fulfillment of a cooperative research agreement between the Marketing Services Division of the Agricultural Marketing Service of the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA AMS) and Oregon State University's Niche Meat Processor Assistance Network (NMPAN).

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