



Massachusetts Department of Agricultural Resources and Community Involved in Sustaining Agriculture - South Deerfield, MA

A data driven approach allowed them to identify the cost-effective solutions that would have the most impact for the regional meat supply.

AMS GRANTS AWARDED

Federal State Marketing Improvement Program (FSMIP) 2012, grant for \$32,060

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

HISTORY OF BUSINESS OR PROJECT

Based in South Deerfield, Massachusetts, Community Involved in Sustaining Agriculture, or CISA, was incorporated in 1999. Their mission is strengthening farms and engaging the community to build the local food economy. They started the first “buy local” program in the country, Be a Local Hero, Buy Locally Grown®, and have helped start similar projects in many other parts of the country. They also provide extensive business technical assistance; offer zero-interest emergency loans for farmers and farm businesses impacted by weather emergencies; partner on a community investment fund that provides financing to farm and food businesses; and support food access through a low-income senior CSA and Massachusetts’ SNAP-rebate program. This

project came about largely because of CISA’s long-term work with farmers and ranchers and their desire to have more access to slaughter and value-added processing services.

This project involved researching meat producer and buyer needs and exploring models for increasing local meat processing in western Massachusetts, specifically the Pioneer Valley. It was a collaborative research project between the Massachusetts Department of Agricultural Resources and CISA, along with business students from the Isenberg School of Management at University of Massachusetts, Amherst.

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

The project would not have gotten off the ground were it not for the USDA grant. The grant project leveraged the organization’s capacity in very valuable ways. Several years later, CISA still relies on the information produced through the grant project in providing business assistance to meat producers, sourcing support to buyers, and delivering value-

chain facilitation services. It also greatly advanced the organization's understanding that a broader range of solutions needed to be understood and explored beyond just adding more meat processors.

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

The project team completed an in-depth research report and a fillable feasibility template for others to use (linked in the references below). They found there were other potential ways to support local meat production that did not include building new meat processing infrastructure, such as aggregated transport and distribution. By working with business graduate students on the research and report, the project was able to keep costs down yet still produce high quality research. The final products were useful not just for producers/processors in the project region, but also provided useful plans/templates for the rest of the country.

The key recommendations generated in the final report were to:

1. Establish a trade association for meat producers and processors to better coalesce the business interests of parties in the value chain and to advance an efficient and thriving market for local meat products in the Pioneer Valley.
2. Form a transportation and logistics service to reduce the transportation costs incurred by producers and to expand their post-slaughter processing options, by delivering meat products from local processors back to producers farms' and facilitating access to regional secondary processing facilities.
3. Establish fee-for-service meat processing at a local commercial kitchen to provide options for making small batches of value-added products, for producers in the Pioneer Valley who are unable to meet the volume commitments required by existing processors.

According to Project Director Margaret Christie, "The research project empowered our team to establish stronger relationships with the existing meat processors and producers in their region."

Interviews and focus groups with key stakeholders helped to provide a clearer sense of the needs of meat processors and producers in this region and how to best address them. The team, primarily CISA, has been able to respond to what they have found, particularly around technical assistance, such as understanding carcass quality and a whole range of other related topics. CISA's everyday technical assistance often focuses on business management, marketing, and troubleshooting, and research projects like this provide critical staff knowledge that improves the assistance CISA provides to farmers and the businesses that source from them.

Similarly, the project team included both processors and producers, which created opportunities for connections and mutual learning between the two groups. Following the project, CISA offered multiple workshops for meat producers on topics including meat cutting and improving communications with the processor.

WHERE THEY WOULD LIKE TO GO NEXT

Thus far, the project team has not pursued the specific recommendations in the report. They did look at them but made a decision not to pursue based on changing stakeholder needs and opportunities. More slaughter and butcher facilities have come online since the report was written, and other entrepreneurs are solving gaps by aggregating meat or offering meat buying clubs, among other efforts. The project team was not confident that a separate meat trade association was sustainable, yet CISA has taken on some of that technical assistance (one-on-one, workshops and referrals) through their technical assistance programming. Staff are also more skilled at troubleshooting producer/processor relationships than they were before this project.

For the third recommendation, the information gained through this project helped a local shared-use kitchen gain approval for processing some meat products. Additionally, two retail exempt butchers have opened in the region, one of which utilized CISA's expertise gained through this project in their application for financing.

Through this project, the team partnered with the UMass-Amherst graduate school in business, with a hope to get them more interested in local food systems work. The students were fantastic to work with and at least one has gone on to work with a cooperative and food business consulting company.

Poultry processing was not included in this project and has continued to be a gap in the region. As the Mighty Fine Poultry case study elucidated, it is very hard to make a stand-alone poultry slaughterhouse a financially feasible business. However, in 2019, a new state-inspected poultry processor has opened in CISA's region.

Local institutions have pursued innovative approaches to sourcing more locally and regionally grown meat. These include a partnership through which several colleges will jointly purchase whole animals during the slow winter slaughterhouse season and the creation of products using underutilized local fish species.

REFERENCES/LINKS

<https://www.buylocalfood.org/slaughter-and-meat-processing/>

https://www.buylocalfood.org/upload/resource/CISA_MeatReport_2013.pdf

<https://www.buylocalfood.org/feasibility-template-for-small-scale-meat-processor-2013/>

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