

Direct Alternative

Marketing meat directly to consumers offers an alternative to beef producers.

Story by

LISA SOLOMON

Dan Bennett, like most farmers, wants to increase his profits and decrease his risk. So, when an opportunity comes along to do both, he's all for it.

Bennett is among a growing number of farmers selling meat directly to consumers and retailers instead of selling livestock to a packinghouse. The concept is called direct meat marketing.

"Our emphasis has changed from a direct-to-individual model to much more of a wholesale business," Bennett says. "I still believe the individual market is the most reliable and loyal."

Bennett's family owns Bennett Ranch, Ottawa, Kan. They sell all-natural beef, pork, poultry and eggs. Bennett started the operation in 1997, primarily selling products to family and friends. But since 1999, the Bennetts have sold their goods to stores and restaurants.

Finding customers

Building a customer base can pose a challenge at times in the direct meat market, says Jana Beckman, coordinator of the Kansas Center for Sustainable Agriculture and Alternative Crops (KCSAAC).

For Bennett, marketing involves more than putting up handmade signs along the side of the road. He claims word of mouth is his operation's best marketing tool. The ranch also has its own Web site and sends out a newsletter twice a year.

When marketing, it is important to remember to target a specific audience rather than the general public, Beckman says.

"Advertisements placed in the local newspaper or radio station sometimes get lost amidst the sea of announcements," she notes. "It is best to place those ads in places where they can really be seen, such as local club newsletters or in the grocery or health-food store."

Rules to follow

In order to sell meat directly from the farm, there are certain livestock processing regulations to meet, says Liz Boyle, a meat scientist with Kansas State University (K-State) Research and Extension.

Producers must have their meat processed at either a state or federally inspected packing facility. Meat that will be sold across state lines must be processed at a federally inspected processing facility.

In situations where the consumer buys the animal from the producer and the pro-

ducer delivers the animal to a processing facility for the consumer, the meat is processed specifically for that consumer and must be marked as "custom, not for sale."

Consumers who purchase their meat this way are able to specify exactly how the meat is processed, including fat content of ground meat, steak thickness and cuts of meat, Boyle says.

Also, she says, a well-planned label is important in the marketing process. Labels provide an opportunity to convey a message about producers and their products, and therefore should be well-designed.

Boyle says labels are required to have the product name; ingredient statement; the name and place of business of the manufacturer, packer or distributor; an accurate statement of the net quantity of contents; and official inspection legend. Other information may be required depending on which regulations apply to the particular product.

Nutrition facts labels also are required for multi-ingredient meat and poultry products, but an exemption is granted if the producer's annual production is less than 100,000 pounds (lb.) of the product and the firm has 500 or fewer employees.

Nutrition labels on fresh meat products currently are voluntary.

Packaging the product also is important. The Appropriate Technology Transfer for Rural Areas (ATTRA) recommends that meat be packaged in airtight, high-quality freezer paper, or Cryovac™. Vacuum packaging is another option, but can be costly, adding up to 10¢ per pound in extra costs, according to ATTRA.

Questions regarding direct meat marketing can be directed to Beckman at (785) 532-1440 or kcsaac@oznet.ksu.edu. The center also can be reached at KCSAAC, Kansas State University, 3602 Throckmorton Hall, c/o HFRR, Manhattan, KS 66506.



Editor's Note: *This article was supplied by Kansas State University Research and Extension. To access ATTRA resources on direct marketing, visit the organization's Web site at www.attra.org; click on the "Search" button; enter "direct meat marketing" (including the quotation marks) in the search field; and click on the "Search" button to the left of the search field.*