

A man with short brown hair, wearing a blue hoodie with a red apple logo on the chest, stands in a grassy field. In the background, several black and white cows are grazing. The field is bordered by a fence, and there are trees in the distance under a clear sky.

IMPEC Makes an Impact

Producer-processor Seth Church plans to use compost generated from the inedible products at Apple Brandy Prime Cuts to spread on his pastures.

North Carolina program gives a boost to small packers.

by Becky Mills, field editor

It was the ultimate teachable moment. At the start of the pandemic, the mega-packinghouses ground to a halt, or at least to a crawl. Cattle were backed up in feedyards and backgrounding lots. Consumers panicked when they were faced with empty meat coolers in grocery stores. Suddenly, small independent packing plants found themselves booked at least a year in advance.

The obvious answer was to ramp up production in these local plants. Easier said than done.

Joe Hampton, North Carolina

Department of Agriculture (NCDA), says, “Small packers are faced with the disadvantage of being small-scale when it comes to both purchases and the disposal of offal, or drop.”

For example, he says, large packers may have three semitrailer loads of beef tongues available in a day and can market them at a profit, while small independent packers may have to pay to have them picked up and taken to the landfill.

The NCDA listened. When federal funds from the *American Rescue Plan Act* became available in 2020, they earmarked the

money for grants to independent meat and seafood processors. The Increasing Meat Production, Efficiency and Capacity (IMPEC) program is now in Phase 4, where an estimated \$15 million was to be awarded in January 2023.

Directing dollars

Like the rest of the IMPEC grants, a committee of cattle producers, university faculty members, seafood processors and others from the food industry give each application a numerical score. NCDA officials average those numbers and award

the grant money accordingly. The recipients are required to put in \$1 for every \$2 in IMPEC funds.

Hampton says innovation is one of the criteria for the latest round of IMPEC funds. Producer-processor Seth Church takes that one off the charts. He has already started grading a site on his family's farm to compost the inedible products.

Since the conception-to-consumption operation includes both a harvest facility and a processing operation, it doesn't take long for the inedible products to pile up, literally.

Church processes 10-12 head of finished cattle a week of their own, marketed under Apple Brandy Beef. In addition, he custom-harvests another 25 head or more per week under inspection for other producers.

Then there are the hogs, sheep and goats he custom-harvests and processes.

"It was a big obstacle for us," says Church. "We had a contractor who was supposed to pick up the product, but they would not do it consistently."

There is a corporate-owned boxed meat plant 30 miles away, and if they filled the contractor's trucks, the trucks wouldn't stop at his facility.

"At times it would stop our production because we didn't have anywhere to put it," he says.

Currently he's having to haul the inedible products to the landfill, where he pays by the ton to dump them.

After brainstorming with NCDA officials, the idea of composting took hold. NCDA then brought in researchers from North Carolina State University (NCSU) to help it take shape.

One of Apple Brandy Beef's trucks will take the inedible products to the composting facility in sealed, leak-proof containers. There, a grinder

will break the material down, then it will be mixed with sawdust from Wilkes Livestock Market, where Church is a co-owner.

"The sawdust gets dusty at the stockyard, so we change it often," Church explains. "We'll use it for our carbon source. A lot of pieces come together for this."

The mix then goes in forced-aeration compost bins.

Waste to want

"By grinding and aerating it, in 14 to 21 days we will have a product ready to spread," he says. He'll use a manure spreader to apply it to his pastures, like he did with broiler litter.

The timing couldn't be better. Church is in the middle of broiler country, but poultry companies changed the way they manage litter and don't clean it out as often. That means litter, his go-to fertilizer, isn't nearly as available. That and the drastic increase in commercial fertilizer prices left him looking for alternatives.

As far as Church knows, he is the only processor in the country to experiment with composting inedible products. So, NCSU soil scientists can't give him precise answers on the nutrient value of the compost. However, they estimate it will be around one-third that of poultry litter. He says he'll just spread it more often.

They also tell him nitrogen tends to vaporize quickly from poultry litter. So, by spreading the compost more often, he'll be



Shawna Gilreath, shown with fiancé Seth Church, handles the retail portion of Apple Brandy Prime Cuts. She also schedules harvest and processing appointments.

able to get nitrogen, the most valuable component, on the ground when it is at its peak.

For now, Church just plans to compost the inedible product from Apple Brandy Beef. However, in the future he hopes to be able to offer to pick up inedible products from other independent processors in the area. Besides three USDA-inspected plants in a 50-mile radius, there are at least three custom-exempt processors. Apple Brandy Beef harvests the animals for the other processors, then returns the hanging carcasses to them for processing.

Not first effort

While composting wins the prize for the most innovative use of IMPEC funds, it isn't Church's first experience with the grant process. He used the money from previous IMPEC grants to update part of the equipment at the harvest facility, which was built in the 1960s.

He also used IMPEC funds to turn a former restaurant into the processing and retail portion of Apple Brandy Beef.

Continued on page 142



The pastures that supply high-end cattle to Apple Brandy Beef will be getting a boost from compost generated by inedible products from Apple Brandy Prime Cuts.

The biggest part went into the rail system, so hanging carcasses can be safely transported from trucks to the cutting room.

Doubling down

IMPEC funds are also living up to their name farther east, at Piedmont Custom Meats Inc. Husband-and-wife team Larry and Donna Moore are applying their business skills to double capacity.

Donna, formerly a buyer at Food Lion, and Larry, who was in corporate management, bought the harvest and processing facility in 2014 when the former owner was retiring. They were afraid if it closed they would no longer have a place to harvest and process the cattle from their grass-finishing operation.

Ironically, they were soon so busy with their new enterprise they handed the sales of their meat to others and now strictly offer custom-harvesting and processing.

“We don’t buy anything, and we don’t sell anything,” says Larry. “We strictly provide a service.”

That’s for 600-plus customers a year who



Husband-and-wife team Donna and Larry Moore have doubled harvest and processing capacity at Piedmont Custom Meats Inc. with help from North Carolina Department of Agriculture grants.

bring in anything from a single steer, hog, goat or lamb a year to three or four bison to 10 or 12 finished cattle a month.

To complicate matters more, by 2018 they had badly outgrown the original facility in Gibsonville. Unable to expand there, they bought and completely redid a building in

Asheboro, an hour away, which now serves as their processing facility and headquarters.

When it comes to juggling 600 appointments a year, Larry says, “It is a logistics nightmare, and Donna is the queen of logistics.”

Continued on page 144

Good help is hard to find

Ask almost any small- to mid-size packer about their biggest challenge, and they’ll tell you the same thing: Good help, especially skilled help, is hard to find.

As a result, Wisconsin state officials are taking the need for skilled meat-processing employees seriously. Up to \$5 million from the federal *American Rescue Plan Act* is being funneled to a Meat Talent Development Program. This funding attracts students to meat careers, provides financial support to students in Wisconsin meat-processing training programs, supports program development, and connects the meat-processing industry with potential employees.

Also, the state’s agriculture department recently unveiled the Meat Pathways website, which includes links to training options and information about jobs.

In North Carolina, one processor offers its own on-the-job training. Larry Moore, Piedmont Custom Meats Inc., says: “There is no such thing as a skilled meat cutter you can hire, so we have our own

meat-cutting training program. They are on the production line side-by-side, being taught and trained by a skilled meat cutter.”

Moore gives full credit to his wife, Donna, for the idea.

“From the beginning to end, it takes 12 to 18 months to take an unskilled laborer and turn him into a skilled meat cutter,” he says.

“From the chief financial officer’s perspective, to keep them in that program to begin with, their productivity does not match what you pay them. So, you are truly investing in that employee and the opportunity. You hope you’re going to be able to keep them long-term and turn them into a highly skilled, proficient, productive meat cutter.”

Donna, president and CEO of Piedmont Meats, says: “We started this program in 2021, and we’ve only lost one employee. We also offer a bonus to our existing employees if they bring in a new employee and they stay six months. So, there’s incentive for employees to find other people to come work.”



Piedmont Custom Meats Inc. has used grants from the North Carolina Department of Agriculture to increase its efficiency and capacity.

Thankfully, Donna says, most of their customers use email to schedule harvest appointments and pick-up times for the processed, packaged, labeled and frozen meat.

“I have a system and a system to back up the system,” she says. “I compare myself to a conductor at the train station. I make sure

all the trains are on the right track and leave on time.”

The couple has used IMPEC funds to make sure those trains and tracks do their jobs safely and efficiently so they can serve as many customers as possible.

“Pre-IMPEC, we were doing right at 3,000 head annually,” says Donna. “This year it will be over 6,000 head.”

Cattle are now the predominant species, at 65-70 head a week, taking over the No. 1 spot from hogs.

Says Larry: “Before IMPEC, our cow carcass cooler could hang maybe 60, and that was pushing it. Today we can hang 200. We expanded our production facility an additional 18,000 square feet. The clock starts ticking on us the minute we harvest that animal,

and our goal is to get it back to the customer as quickly as possible or as close to the hang time, typically 14 days, that they asked for.”

Greatly needed

NCDA’s Joe Hampton says now there is no doubt just how badly those funds were needed and how well they were and are being used.

“We need to increase harvest capacity even more,” he emphasizes, pointing out producers’ desire to add value to their cattle and consumers’ desire to buy local.

“I’ve raised cattle since 1981, and it is amazing how much demand is there,” he says. “At first we were afraid we’d end up with too much capacity and plants would sit empty. That is far from the case. Our processors are now more behind than they were when the pandemic started. That just shows how great the demand is for local meat.” **ABB**



Donna Moore says scheduling harvest and processing appointments is like being a conductor at a train station.

Editor’s note: Becky Mills is a freelance writer and cattlemaster from Cuthbert, GA.