

AGENDA PRIORITIES

21. Contingent upon further market assessment, establish a state meat and poultry inspection program in cooperation with the federal Food Safety and Inspection Services (FSIS) to spur new meat processing infrastructure.

GROWTH INDUSTRY: MICHIGAN LIVESTOCK PRODUCTION AND MEAT PROCESSING

Michigan is an exception to the national scene in livestock production and meat processing. Nationally, just four companies control as much as 80 percent of the U.S. meat industry and have eliminated most smaller-scale and independent producers and processors along the way.

In Michigan, however, the basics of a local and regional system still exist. This base of Michigan companies – from livestock buying stations and meat processors to more than 26,000 animal operations – puts Michigan in prime position to build a strong independent meat industry as consumers call for more local, organic, grass-fed and other types of meat products.



Photo by Patty Cantrell

Already many smaller livestock producers and meat processors in Michigan are growing with this consumer demand. Just ask Steve Sytsma, who operates the third generation meat packing business, Byron Center Meats, near Grand Rapids, with his brother and father.

Over the course of a year, the company cuts and wraps meat for some 700 independent livestock producers in Michigan and nearby Indiana. This work is a core part of the company's business and is growing along with its longtime work cutting and wrapping beef for the food distributor Sysco Grand Rapids. With 40 employees, Byron Center Meats has nearly doubled in size and sales since updating its facilities in 2000.

"Back in 1990, they said processing for independent producers was a dying part of the industry," Sytsma said. "But over the past few years we've seen steady and double digit growth."

Opportunity

Sytsma and others attribute this growth to strong consumer demand for more variety and accountability in the meat products they buy. Locally raised, organic, grass-fed, and growth-hormone-free are among the characteristics in high demand and which Michigan farms and family-owned processing businesses are well positioned to supply.

"Michigan is ripe for growth in this industry," says Mike DeVries, a board member of the Michigan Meat Association and consultant to several successful projects, including the Michigan Turkey Producers' state-of-the-art plant and Byron Center Meats' expansion.

"There's a push for local, and we can do it" said DeVries.

Need

While many signs are positive, the resurgence of family-scale meat production and processing in Michigan is still in beginning stages. Michigan can ensure that jobs and investment grow in this sector by applying some tried-and-true economic development tools and techniques.

In particular, local and state officials must address two spots along the supply chain of inputs and services in Michigan's independent meat industry.

- *One spot is the available supply of Michigan-raised livestock for the state's independent meat processors to use and sell. Supply from smaller-scale livestock producers in Michigan is just ramping up, and much of the larger volume livestock production in Michigan is tied up in contracts with bigger companies.*
- *The other tough spot is the need to update and improve smaller-scale federally inspected slaughter facilities, which are the supply chain lynchpin between producers and companies like Byron Center Meats, that provide further meat processing like cutting, wrapping, smoking, drying, and sausage-making.*

Action

Steps to address these issues, grow jobs and consumer options in the process, include:

- **Basic business support and networking.** *Business planning support, technical assistance suited to new market opportunities, and help with regulatory information and compliance are low-cost, high-return steps local and state officials can take. Communities can get started by bringing local livestock producers and nearby meat processors and buyers together in roundtable fashion to identify specific needs and opportunities. Economic development officials can then act on this information and continue convening and connecting livestock producers and meat processors for valuable, ongoing networking.*
- **Strategic facility investment.** *Unlike many states, Michigan has a range of federally inspected slaughter, or "harvest," facilities available to livestock producers. The problem is these animal harvesters need help updating and expanding facilities to grow with the market, and many producers need harvest facilities closer to their operations.*
 - *One solution is to map out and assess characteristics of available harvest facilities, estimate current and potential economic impact of these facilities and make strategic investments in upgrading or building plants needed to serve different areas of the state.*
 - *Another longer-term step is to consider reinstating a state meat inspection program, equivalent to the federal inspection program, to provide added on-the-ground assistance to smaller companies as they build their capacity. This recommendation should be subject to a closer study of the market's development and needs and a review of state government's ability to provide efficient and cost-effective service.*

1-2-3 Go!

You can get started in your community by raising awareness among local consumers and officials of just how common livestock production is in your area and how strong interest is in locally produced meats. If you're involved in local government or business, consider promoting the idea of a meat industry roundtable. If you're a local resident interested in raising general attention, consider a fun event that can build good will, attract media attention, and engage local officials. Ideas include something like a Meat Eater Mixer or a sausage making contest at the county fair to showcase local producers and products and raise money for a local cause, like stocking emergency food pantries.