

# **Meat Processing Facility Vision Statement and Position Paper**

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Created by the  
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## **Introduction**

A group of farmers has been working for nearly two years to address the critical lack of slaughter and meat processing capacity in the area roughly centered around Southeastern Vermont and Southwestern New Hampshire. In January of 2008, we organized into the Central New England Meat Processing Project Steering Committee. This document is the Steering Committee's attempt to distill the features that are most important to us in the development of a slaughterhouse business that could serve this area. We recognize that there may be some difficulty in meeting all these goals in the early days of operation, but hope that this Vision Statement can serve as a ideal to which the operation can aspire.

The facility services, structure and descriptions outlined here are intended to be broad and exhaustive, as the Steering Committee gathers information and determines which components are feasible.

## **Summary**

We support the development of a regionally-scaled, clean, well organized, efficient, USDA-inspected meat processing facility that is respectful and responsive to the needs of its employees, producers, consumers, the environment and the community, which will treat the animals in a humane and respectful fashion at all times. We support a facility that provides processing, cutting, and packaging that adds value to the high quality meat produced with pride and care by our region's farmers. We launched this effort in response to a shortage of capacity in the region that was made even more apparent when two nearby slaughterhouses were destroyed by fire in 2006. Farmers were left scrambling for slaughter dates and hauling animals up to two hours to remaining USDA facilities.

## **Criteria for Quality**

Respect for and humane treatment of animals is a part of the culture of the operation.

Consideration will be given to designing facilities to minimize animal stress and to ease animal handling.

Plant management will build strong, trusting relationships with producers based on consistent, reliable customer service. Ample opportunities for communication and a solid grievance resolution procedure provide a framework for this model.

This plant will provide quality employment. We seek to offer a competitive package of wages & benefits and work environment that is respectful, inclusive and empowering.

Systems and infrastructure will be in place to allow animals to be tracked from door to door, assuring producer of accurate measurements, identification, and processing through the plant.

Opportunities for education at every level of the operation facilitates communication, maximizes efficiency and builds a strong, committed community of clients. These opportunities will reach out to producers, staff and “end user” clients.

Management will regularly solicit input from producers.

The plant will be designed with environmental, financial and personnel sustainability in mind.

Successful management of the fall harvest window will include many creative solutions that work together to even out the cash flow and work through the year.

## **Animal Handling**

Upon arrival, animals will be unloaded and sorted into clean pens that are flexible so as to allow sorting by species and owner such that no co-mingling occurs and different sized lots can be accommodated easily. Pens will be protected from the elements, will have good ventilation, and will be cleaned regularly and thoroughly. If animals must be fed while at the plant, management will develop a protocol for feeding of all animals such that the integrity of the producer's label claims is upheld; for example, certified organic animals will receive only certified organic feed.

The plant staff will be trained so as to facilitate humane, low-stress animal handling at all times. Unloading area, pens, aisles and chutes will be clean and well maintained, designed to minimize stress and handling, and facilitate natural animal movement.

The unloading area will be designed to accommodate trailers of different sizes and styles, and will be sensitive to the needs of surrounding neighbors and plant visitors.

Reliable and somewhat flexible scheduling will allow producers to understand the factors that influence the amount of hold time for animals at the plant. The use of online communication for scheduling and clearly delineated procedures may be beneficial in this or other areas.

## **Customer Service**

The Steering Committee envisions that plant management will build a strong, trusting relationship between producers and processors that is built on consistent, reliable customer service. Ample opportunities for communication and a solid grievance resolution procedure provide a framework for this model.

Schedules will be designed to maximize plant efficiency to the extent that this can be reconciled with allowing some capacity for urgent needs such as unanticipated culls or scheduling problems such as weather-related delays in trucking. Corresponding mechanisms provide accountability for both the producer and plant. For instance, the plant may provide producers with approximate kill

times so they can schedule drop-off according to their preferred hold time, however a late delivery will incur extra charges or a “3 strikes” policy to ensure the plant against tardy arrivals.

A tracking system for animals begins at drop off with specification of the pen location and finishes with labels on each carton of meat. The tracking system labels each individual animal and matches them to the producer. As the product moves through the plant, its status will be readily available to the staff, and producers will be able to learn the status by calling the plant. It attaches cutting specifications to the individual animal, as illustrated in the following example:

Farmer Lehan delivers two beef animals to Nirvana Slaughterhouse on Monday, June 14. Bessie and Frank will be slaughtered today, they are number 5 & 6 in slaughter order. Bessie has done her duty as a milk cow for 12 years, and will be turned into hamburgers and ground meat. Frank’s a young and tender steer. One side has been sold to two different families as cut-to-order quarters, while the other half will be sold as retail cuts in Mr. Lehan’s farm store. Mr. Lehan fills out his cut sheets, one for Bessie and three for Frank, one for each quarter that has been sold and one for the farm store half. Obviously, it wouldn't do to have Frank turned into hamburger and Bessie put into tender cuts. Each cow is tracked from the pen through the plant. When they reach the cutting room, each side of beef has an identifying tag that allows the butcher to pull the corresponding cut sheets and follow specific instructions. When Mr. Lehan arrives to pick up his meat, each animal or order has been boxed and labeled as specified on the cut sheet, making delivery to his customers and his farm store easy.

Cutting supervisor is knowledgeable about cutting meat, but also has excellent communication and customer service skills. Butchers work to develop relationships with producers and assist producers in determining appropriate cuts for any specific carcass, given the variables of age, species, breed, management style and customer requests. Cutters display a willingness to follow specific instructions for each carcass thoroughly and accurately.

Cut sheets are clear and concise, offering different levels of service that producers can choose from. Options for items such as hide, organs and bones are clearly listed. Cut sheets work in conjunction

with color diagrams and cut descriptions that are easily accessible to producers.

Management will provide means for producers to observe operations on both the kill floor and cutting room while maintaining safety of everyone involved and good sanitation practices. This could be accomplished via discreetly positioned windows to work areas that would be labeled clearly so that those who wished to avoid them could do so. It could also be accomplished via scheduled visits. The important consideration is that plant management will provide a means for producers to develop confidence in the operation by conducting their own inspections.

A grievance resolution process will be established that is easily accessible to producers at any time before or after leaving the plant. Complaints will be recorded or tracked so as to make it easy to detect patterns and recognize when the root cause has been addressed.

## **Employment & Training**

This plant will provide employment opportunities that offer a livable wage (commensurate with experience), health insurance and a positive work environment. Current and potential employees would be encouraged to pursue educational opportunities, and plant management will work with local educational institutions in developing a training program.

Employees will be trained professionals in the field of meat processing and will also possess excellent communication skills, demonstrating the ability and willingness to interact with producers as necessary.

A grievance procedure will be available and management will work to address the root of the concerns immediately, with follow up to check in with the employee.

Seasonal workers may be employed to augment the staff during busy times. They will supplement, but not replace year-round personnel. Plant management will comply with immigration laws and regulations, as well as all other laws regarding employment practices.

The facility would strive to be multi-generational, allowing the craft of meat cutting to be taught by seasoned experts to enthusiastic youth.

## **Services Offered**

- ◆ USDA inspected slaughter and butcher of multiple species:
  - Sheep
  - Goat
  - Pig
  - Cow
  - Poultry
  - Rabbit
  - Other
- ◆ Halal and Kosher slaughter options
- ◆ Two tracks for processing: standard and customized
  - The standard option is less expensive, and offers popular selections of cuts and packaging that maximizes cutting room throughput and efficiency.
  - Customized processing allows customers to order specific cuts and packaging for an additional fee.
  - Customized option includes patties and fresh sausage. Future options might include hot dogs, bologna and specialty products.
- ◆ Extended hang times are available, an additional storage fee may be charged.
- ◆ Labeling options: Plant label w/ facility name or customized labels will be available. Fees will be charged for design, approval, and production of customized labels, or for the approval of customer-produced labels.
- ◆ Coordination of additional services either in house or through outside businesses, such services might include:
  - Hide/pelt salting for later tanning
  - Smoking & curing (offering cover pickle brining and cold smoking, injection pumping and hot smoking)
  - Transportation of live animals to the plant
  - Delivery of processed meat to the farm.

- On farm slaughter for custom producers.
- Assistance with selling of retail meat cuts. This may be through the plant itself, as in a meat counter open to the public, or it may be connecting retail customers with producers who wish to be contacted.
- ◆ Meat will be available in the producer's choice of fresh or frozen upon pickup. Freezing will take place in a flash freezer, and will be fully frozen before pickup. A variety of packaging materials will be available, each package will be clean and neat, clearly labeled and creating a minimum of packing waste.
- ◆ Wrapping options balance environmental concerns with shelf life of product. Quality, heavy duty plastic/paper with minimum waste are optimum. Customer choice of paper or cryovac are available, others as appropriate.
- ◆ Carcass data including live and hanging weight, limited analysis and important defects observed will be available to the producer. This process may be assisted by technologies such as bar coding, computer tracking or pencil and paper.
- ◆ A clean, comfortable waiting area will be available. This area may include a Wi-fi hot spot or computer for producers' use.

## **Education**

The plant will support educational opportunities to help producers learn more about the butchering process and cutting options so they can advise their customers. Other topics may include ways to maximize the quality of their products and the viability of their businesses.

Butchers will be supported in pursuing their own education so they are aware of industry changes and developments and are able to recognize and generate the “latest and greatest” cuts when customers request them.

The plant will support classes and demonstrations designed to help consumers understand what to expect when buying local meat, how to cook meat that is local and fresh, etc. This would provide an opportunity for members of the local community to be involved in the plant, even if it does not offer retail meat sales.

## **Seasonality of Meat Processing**

A variety of tactics used to address the seasonality of the industry may include:

- creative scheduling of plant employees and operations;
- a fee scale with a seasonal element that rewards those processing animals outside of the busiest times of the year;
- or reserved slots that can be purchased in advance.

These policies will be widely advertised in farm publications and direct mail to current and potential customers, engaging them in the challenge of supporting a successful facility.

## **Decision Making & Management**

Plant management will solicit producer input and feedback regularly, and consideration will be given to business structures that allow producer representation on a board of directors, and/or ownership structures that could give producers an equity stake in the plant and commensurate voting rights.

Systems will be in place to incorporate customer feedback into the decision making process, and to record and track feedback to watch trends and ensure that root problems are addressed. An additional goal of the feedback system would be prevent customer complaints and grievances from consuming an undue amount of plant management's time, and to minimize interruptions in production.

## **Sustainability**

Use of low-tech, green technologies such as solar hot water pre-heating, green roof and in-ground coolers will be considered as appropriate in order to reduce operating expenses in the long term.

Composting of offal and, either on or off site, will be considered.

The facility will be designed to fit in to the architectural styles of New England. Office and waiting areas will be designed with a tasteful, rustic New England feel. Work spaces will be ergonomically designed with maximized natural lighting. Flow of animals, people and meat throughout the plant will be efficient and logical. Windows to the outside and to adjoining segments of the building where allowable regarding inspection, minimize the “factory” environment.

## **Marketing & Sales**

Even before the slaughterhouse fires of 2006, producers in central New England have felt there was a shortage of slaughter and processing capacity, particularly during the late fall and early winter when slaughterhouses are busiest.

As a result, the plant we envision would provide services focused on helping farmers get their animals slaughtered and butchered for sale. In the future, associated businesses such as wholesale distribution, a retail meat counter, and food processing could be investigated as potential expansion areas.

In order to be accessible to producers from the region, which we define as the lower Connecticut River valley of New Hampshire and Vermont as well as western Massachusetts, and beyond, the facility should be located with easy access to both North-South and East-West transportation routes. The facility should be well marked with information such as hours and scope of the operation readily accessible to passers-by.

Marketing will focus on sharing the culture and scope of the operation utilizing a variety of regional farm publications. The development of a full-scale marketing plan will utilize a variety of resources.

Development of farm, state and regional brand name recognition is important. Support of these efforts will include labeling and marketing.

## **Pricing**

Base pricing will reflect the operational budget of the plant and will ensure its financial sustainability. The plant recognizes that producers are willing to pay for quality service, but that there is a ceiling beyond which is impractical to pass price increases along to customers.

## **Financial**

Business planning will determine a successful scale for the start-up of the operation. It will also include development of realistic benchmarks for financing. Energy efficiencies in plant design may make the plant eligible for some USDA funding. This option and similar programs will be investigated early in the process for their applicability and potential.

The Steering Committee will give consideration to a business structure that may lend itself to various types of equity investment, such as grants, producer investment, and outside investment.