

Identification of Local Ethnic Needs for Livestock

Final Report for FNE99-247

Project Type: Farmer

Funds awarded in 1999: \$4,904.00

Projected End Date: 12/31/2002

Matching Non-Federal Funds: \$3,020.00

Region: Northeast

State: Vermont

Project Leader:

[Jennifer Gilligan](#)

Project Information

Summary:

Note to readers, attached is the complete final report for FNE99-247

Vermont has many small livestock producers seeking markets, together with communities of resettled ethnic populations seeking consistent livestock supply under unique conditions. The problem is how to match producers and ethnic populations. This project attempted to locate ethnic groups and sponsors, researched the specific needs of several significant ethnic populations in Vermont, researched availability of livestock and on-farm facilities for distribution, made information available to ethnic groups and to livestock producers through various in-place organizations.

Introduction:

Andrews Farm is a 600-acre former dairy operation now raising sheep, turkey, vegetables, hay, timber and firewood, chicken and eggs.

Since the inception of this grant, no essential changes in operation have been made, though the operation has become somewhat larger in scale and probably reached its potential under present management: sheep flock has increased; meat birds (chickens) are now raised for early summer distribution; retail farm store has expanded offerings, begun a CSA operation, and generally increased visibility in the community. These efforts to capture larger market share have targeted the local community including ethnic groups in the Burlington area.

Cooperators were Roger Clapp, then-Deputy Commissioner of Agricultural Development, Vermont Department of Agriculture, Montpelier, Vermont. Roger Clapp was extremely helpful in providing information and comment during his tenure at the Vermont Department of Agriculture. For some time after he left the Department of Agriculture position, he provided valuable information from his own research into ethnic markets and was available for consultation.

Carol Delaney, Small Ruminant Dairy Specialist, University of Vermont Extension Service, University of Vermont, Burlington, Vermont. Mailed producer survey in December 2000 as insert in her newsletter; extremely helpful as an advisor on

issues of sheep and goat issues and producers; involved in formation of both Pride of Vermont and Vermont Quality Meats, so shared knowledge of cooperative marketing ventures as they developed.

Chet Parsons, Non-Dairy Animal Specialist, University of Vermont Extension Service, University of Vermont, Burlington, Vermont. Chet provided considerable information regarding Vermont/New England sheep and poultry production and producer needs, in informal conversation and in response to phoned questions and requests for reactions.

Center for Rural Studies, University of Vermont, Burlington, Vermont. Early assistance with writing surveys to be distributed both to sheep producers and to ethnic populations.

George Wright, Vermont Refugee Resettlement Agency, Hegeman Avenue, Colchester, Vermont. Not named in original grant proposal, but provided valuable feedback regarding ethnic populations in the Burlington area; provided translation of survey from English into native language, and advice regarding distribution.

Cooperators

- [Roger Clapp](#)

Technical Advisor

Vermont Department of Agriculture
Montpelier, VT 05620

(802) 828-2831 (office)

Research

Materials and methods:

I wrote and, in December of 2000, mailed a survey to Vermont Sheep Producers and to Small Ruminant Dairy group, using mailing lists of those organizations. In drafting the survey, I attempted to measure producer experiences and attitudes regarding direct marketing to ethnic populations, as well as to develop a profile of producers who were serving this market. I followed up with phone calls to respondents who offered specific information regarding their experiences with ethnic groups. Copy of survey is attached, together with a summary of comments by producers and summary of findings.

I wrote and, in June and July of 2002, distributed a survey to measure needs and buying habits among ethnic populations in northern Vermont. This survey was translated into Bosnian and then disseminated through several Burlington locations: three food stores serving Islamic populations, and the Islamic Center in Colchester. I received NO completed surveys: an unexpected result!

From inception of grant to present, I sought conversations with individuals recently resettled in Vermont, probing for attitudes, experiences, needs regarding livestock locally available and how individuals cared to purchase meats and other foods. Some of these interviews were conducted on-farm, some by dropping by the Islamic Center in Colchester prior to religious services there conducted weekly, some with

merchants serving ethnic populations.

I also interviewed, by telephone or in person, individuals in several organizations which serve resettled populations in Vermont. I collected newspaper articles on resettled populations, and researched food needs, particularly of Muslim populations, on the internet.

I visited two New York farms where farmers directly market lamb to individuals, particularly Bosnians, and interviewed the farmers regarding their facilities and regarding their experiences with resettled populations.

As there is considerable activity around direct marketing to ethnic groups in New York State, I monitored Cornell's internet 'list-serve' for producer ideas and comments re ethnic sales. I have had internet conversations, of particular interest with Capricorn Hill Farm in New York. Capricorn Hill Farm has organized opportunities for direct sales between producers and persons from other heritages, together with on-farm slaughter option.

I contacted slaughter facilities in Vermont, for information regarding services, if any, provided to individuals resettled from other countries, and questioned owners regarding slaughter/processing of sheep in Vermont and future of their businesses.

As a side issue, I researched livestock composting in Vermont, an issue relevant to both on-farm mortalities and carcass disposal needs should a farmer process livestock on-farm. In this effort, I contacted two composting operations in Vermont, read the available research from several university studies regarding livestock composting, interviewed several producers who have tried livestock composting, and attended a seminar on the subject.

Through the producer survey and in conversation, I investigated how Vermont producers market their lamb: regional auctions, Lamb Promotion Board/ Vermont Sheep Breeders Association (VSBA) truck sales, buyers who pick up at the farm, direct sales to consumers and to wholesale accounts. I attended several early (organizational) meetings of Pride of Vermont (POV; a northern Vermont cooperative) and tried to keep in touch with what POV and Vermont Quality Meats (VQM) were offering producers.

I was instrumental in setting up a meeting with Vermont Department of Agriculture and Vermont Health Department officials, and several producers, to discuss legalities regarding on-farm slaughter in Vermont and options for direct marketing by producers to meet ethnic market needs.

Through outreach (producer meetings & programs, internet list-serve, personal contact, VSBA Board meetings) I invited producer contact and solicited information from producers regarding marketing in general and to ethnic groups in particular.

Research conclusions:

The State of Vermont versus The Ethnic Market:

Hugely significant (and unexpected) information came early on! Several months into my research I discovered that on-farm slaughter of livestock purchased by individuals is actually illegal by Vermont statute. In summary, Vermont's tie-in with a United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) program requires on-site inspection at time of slaughter of livestock for retail sale (poultry under 1000 birds an exemption). There are two underlying justifications for the Vermont statute: 1) protection of the public health by overseeing condition of animals to be sold retail to the public; and, 2) protection of the slaughterhouse operations within the state from competition at the farm level. In addition, the USDA program provides some financial support for Vermont's inspection system. Other surrounding states monitor

such issues through their departments of agriculture.

It is perfectly legal for a farmer to slaughter for home use – not for resale -- without an inspector on site. It is perfectly legal for someone to purchase an animal, load it into the trunk of a car and take it home to garage or lawn where then it is slaughtered. It is perfectly legal for the new owner to slaughter a mile down the road or in the woods en route home (assuming no trespass issues). Why, then, if some individual not related to the farmer has purchased an animal, is it not permissible for that individual to slaughter his newly OWNED animal on the premises and for his own home use?

Is there really a health issue? In my observation, buyers from various ethnic groups are experienced, trained by their own fathers to select wisely and kill efficiently, and as aware as anyone (meat inspectors included) of indicators that a live animal or animal carcass carries disease. They appear aware of sheep characteristics, insist upon having a selection of animals from which to choose and are observant of farm practices (cleanliness, feed, pasture: buyers appear to choose the farm as well as the animal). Given such awareness, can we not presume that the buyer will select an animal which is no health threat to their own family and friends?

It can also be argued that on-farm killing of livestock is more humane than shipping livestock to auction or slaughter facility: corralling, loading, trucking and then holding livestock in strange – to the animal– environs, with strange – to them – other animals and sometimes without feed and water for long periods of transit time. On-farm, the animal is not five minutes from corral (with feed and water in known surroundings) to kill. From my direct observation, ethnic buyers take care to calm the animal prior to kill, are swift with the actual kill. As a producer, I have the option of refusing sale of any of my animals to someone whose skill I doubt or whose treatment of my animal is rough.

Many of our lambs go to urban markets which allow public selection from an array of live animals, then on-site kill at the marketplace. I personally shudder to think of the chaos and confusion an animal faces: much better on-farm! And, here in Vermont, what of the potential for animal rights issues in neighborhoods where a Bosnian, say, occasionally turns garage or bathroom into an abattoir?

It can also be argued that on-farm slaughter meets religious needs which drive the ethnic market, and that religious values do not change quickly. There is ancient tradition to consider: of celebration requiring whole head-on carcass, fresh, lamb which has been killed ritually, the name of God spoken prior to kill. For certain celebrations, a specific animal is required and must be selected: sometimes ewe lamb, sometimes intact ram lamb, etc. For a variety of reasons, slaughterhouses cannot provide for the needs of this market.

With respect to protection of slaughterhouse business, it would seem that as more and more facilities close there is little reason to discourage other means of meeting slaughter needs.

But, as one slaughterhouse owner put it to me in no uncertain terms, if he is required to abide by a myriad of regulations and the costs of same, it is completely unfair to allow every little farm in Vermont to avoid said expense while doing exactly (“well, maybe not exactly....”) what he does. It is not the potential loss of income or market share to which this owner objected, but the concept of fairness. “If I’ve got to do all this stuff, so should you,” said he.

Outcome: Department of Agriculture and Department of Health officials acknowledged reality of these issues, but stated that Vermont had no plans to disassociate with USDA program, that it would literally require an Act of Congress to change USDA mandates, and that there was evidence that federal programs might

even close the poultry exemption so that on-farm processing would become more, rather than less, regulated in the future.

A variety of ways farmers might approach the ethnic market's need for on-site slaughter were discussed. Producer consensus at the meeting and in later discussions was that solutions were expensive, would require time commitments which our segment of the ag community could probably not rally, and that the market itself would likely resist.

Findings: Portrait of Ethnic Market:

In general, surveys, book/internet research and direct contact and conversations with people reveal that the ethnic market in Vermont is difficult for producers and buyers alike. The ethnic market is inherently elusive. Producers are uncomfortable servicing this market directly.

But it is THE market we sell into. In the words of a long-time livestock buyer/trucker, there is a strong '365-days-a-year' market along the whole Eastern seaboard where various ethnic groups have settled in substantial numbers. The market is real and consistent. Lamb is a traditional meat staple for many of foreign heritage.

Some 2000 middle Europeans, mostly Bosnian, have relocated in Vermont, most in the Chittenden/Addison county area and in the Montpelier and Barre areas, according to refugee resettlement groups. Small groups live throughout the State. When people speak of the 'ethnic market' they generally mean Bosnians. My survey of producers found some 15% of farms responding had been contacted by people of other traditions for direct sale, and these farms were located in all parts of Vermont.

Survey responses and subsequent conversations with producers verified my original hypothesis that it is challenging to sell direct to ethnic populations. Producers said:

Buyers often did not speak English fluently. Producers were not sure what was being said - and vice versa, no doubt.

Buyers could evidence a sometimes unpleasantly chauvinistic attitude toward female producers.

Buyers did not easily accept first price given, wanted to negotiate. In the words of one producer, they "haggle relentlessly over price"

Buyers were unpredictable, often did not show up for appointments or appeared when inconvenient for the producer. Several out-of-State producers reported finding potential customers walking through their barns without prior permission, as if selling to them once implied license for them to visit at any time. Several producers in adjoining states claim that opening the door to ethnic sales means staying on-farm every weekend to host drop-in traffic.

On their part, resettled populations are learning our ways and are probably as uncomfortable as the producers they approach. Initially, my own dealings with potential buyers were through children, presumably because the kids were more comfortable with spoken English. Clearly, kids were translators, decisions made by their fathers, uncles or grandfathers in brief staccato bursts of unfamiliar language. With some prospective customers, wives or daughters spoke for men who stood mostly mute in the background but who expected to do the actual choosing, paying and killing. My impression at the time was that their women were assumed to have a feminine connection with me, a female producer. Also, the women did seem to have better command of spoken English.

Many of these people have experienced horrific treatment at the hands of governments abroad. I have seen scars and missing limbs, heard stories of very difficult times. In my experience, these people are reluctant to speak to agencies or individuals who might be regarded as 'official' in any way. When I questioned folk,

language barriers tended to suddenly arise where such barriers had not existed before, and direct answers were avoided, information vague. Thus, information proved difficult and time-consuming to retrieve.

It is my opinion that some of this hesitation to share information is grounded in a perception that information subverts the bargaining process, puts the one who answers at a disadvantage. A New York State farmer told me that it's important to learn a bit of the language, certainly learn and use customer names, but never never finalize the deal in anything but English. In other words, his success depended upon a personal familiarity with his customers, but he retained the 'upper hand' when it came to the all-important money part. This kind of selling is fun for some producers, reported uncomfortable by most!

Some information-sharing reluctance has its roots in the hard political environment many of these people have fled and which most Vermont producers might find difficult to imagine. At Roger Clapp's request, I invited several Bosnian men to meet with Roger and myself to review for accuracy a schedule of ethnic religious holidays which one of Roger's staff had listed. Though the men knew me and one of the men was fluent in English - their translator to me - the words "department" and "State of Vermont" and "research" apparently so alarmed the group that they did not reappear at my farm for more than a year. I do not think that these men felt my manner overbearing, officious or any more prying than usual in our conversations - which they had always accepted with good humor if not a great deal of forthright information. I am certain that actual words were not misunderstood. The request was, in my view, innocuous and potentially helpful to their needs, as accurate understanding of dates when ethnic markets would spike would certainly help producers be ready for the market. Still, they fled.

Further evidence that ethnic groups are suspicious of anything quasi-official is that the survey I disseminated in the Burlington area did not return even one response.

The local ethnic market is unlikely to totally abandon pursuit of on-farm purchase and slaughter. Tradition and religion preclude that. In conversation, I was informed that many individuals have contempt for lamb cuts offered at supermarkets. Certainly supermarket meat case offerings do not meet cultural requirements for head-on whole lamb for family/community celebrations, let alone the religious requirements of slaughter for such celebrations. Slaughterhouse operators report few foreign-born arranging appointments for slaughter of animals. When asked why they did not approach official slaughter facilities, several Bosnians told me they were unwilling to pay slaughterhouse prices, to receive the carcass in the form the slaughterhouse would provide it, and to accept slaughter without religious words said at the time of kill. Several expressed unwillingness to deal with slaughterhouses they perceived as Muslim in practice only, embracing the faith as a means of obtaining business. Perhaps, also, these people do not know where slaughter facilities are located, their hours, how to deal with personnel. As well, many potential buyers reserve weekends or late afternoon hours for such purchases, and would not easily meet slaughterhouse hours. Nor can most potential buyers apparently deal with the necessity to set appointments for slaughter. It comes down to money, religion and convenience, and for all three reasons the present infrastructure does not work for many people of other heritages.

So, they seek farms. Some will travel 30-50 miles from home to farm. Individuals do always attempt to bargain, but will pay what the farmer asks if the farmer is clearly inflexible about negotiating and if the price is reasonably close to what others are charging. Individuals are not particularly loyal, will go elsewhere if price is a bit lower and/or there is more choice. It appears that information is traded word-of-mouth within the ethnic community. Individuals leave premises clean and are willing

to bury offal or take it away if there is no disposal offered at kill site. Occasionally individuals will purchase other items available at the farm (eggs, vegetables) so that the lamb purchase leads to a larger sale for the farmer. In New York State, at least one farm provided a barbecue site for customers, and this was a great draw for customers.

Much to my surprise, I had approaches from potential customers the weekend after 9/11 and through the Fall of that year. This Spring, however, it appears that world events have affected the ethnic market. Producers complain of lower than usual Easter Market prices at the various auction houses, less demand, and one explanation offered is that Islamic populations are moving elsewhere. Another is that a continuing poor economy affects ethnic purchasing power even at religious holidays.

Another explanation is that the ethnic groups are 'Americanizing.' A New York producer two years ago mentioned that his barbecue set-up was less popular than it had been because entrepreneurial ventures in-town (the Ithaca market) were meeting the need on various street corners. Here in Vermont, producers and customers are cooperating to provide halal slaughter through at least one processing plant, and Islamic folk have plans for a meat market serving their own. At least one of my original customers has purchased land on which he raises his own livestock. Thus, the cultural and religious needs have not changed, but the ethnic populations are finding ways to meet needs without dealing directly at-farm.

Findings: the Vermont Sheep Producer

In Vermont, livestock producers who are not milking cows are very often part-time farmers. According to my 2002 survey, most (67%) of VSBA members have flocks of 40 or fewer sheep, and 20% of membership raise fewer than 20. Shepherding on this scale is not a livelihood.

Though Vermont's sheep producers supply approximately 36% of New England's lamb and 3% of total US production (New England Agricultural Statistics figures), we are not a huge agricultural industry. Our voice is heard through producer groups, but is not loud enough to change laws or divert significant monies to our uses.

Talk to most anyone who raises sheep and you will find very serious personal effort, care and concern in the matter of shepherding. For this reason, direct dealings with the ethnic market can be uncomfortable:

For producers, there is what I think of as the 'eeeeouuuu' factor: the slaughter of animals on-farm seems abhorrent to many, too direct and close...."Eeeeouuuu!" As evidenced by verbal and written responses to my survey of producers, many prefer to distance from the demise of their animals by shipping animals from the farm to remote slaughter location.

Many of those who had had direct contact with ethnic buyers were somehow offended or confused by buyers' approaches. Some producers rudely discouraged any further visits.

Given the part-time nature of shepherding, dealing with folks who just 'turn up' at odd hours of day or night is inconvenient. Producers need appointments, are offended if people do not show up when they say they will and certainly object to people wandering their facilities.

Many producers breed for their own convenience, to lamb when it's comfortable or easier personally. To meet the lucrative market dates, producers need to breed for the Muslim calendar and have a consistent supply of lambs for the big religious holidays. How many of us know when Greek Easter will be next year? Or what is required at Ramadan? Most producers do not know. You cannot capture a market you do not know.

In Vermont, the slaughterhouse situation is beyond crisis point. Slaughter for sales to retail markets requires USDA inspection and considerable paperwork on the part of the slaughterhouse, costs to processors which result in steadily escalating costs to producers. In 2002 I was charged almost 17% more than in 2001 for slaughter at a local packing plant (\$35 per head in 2002, \$30 per head in 2001). Many sheep producers experience long delays for appointments and rescheduling of appointments. Producers report that it is sometimes difficult to get a "date" during the autumn months when many of our lambs are ready.

Processing plants (slaughterhouses) are fewer in number each year. As one processor told me, the real estate on which his plant sits is worth far more than the business he operates; therefore it would be a sensible business decision is to close, sell the property. It is difficult for processing plants to hire workers as they must compete with wages and benefits offered by, say, supermarkets. The paperwork required by regulations adds to escalating costs of operation. Utility costs continue to rise. There are disposal issues for slaughterhouse wastes. Slaughter for either the freezer trade or individual customers is expensive.

Not to mention time-consuming! Local trade has to be built up over several seasons. Most of our neighbors do not habitually eat lamb, so the producer has a considerable education process in building local trade amongst neighbors. Wholesale accounts can buy Western lamb at prices well below a local producer's reasonable profit.

So, we ship to out of state auctions and receive whatever the going rate is at auction. Many producers barely make a profit on animals and often lose actual dollars when the costs of raising lambs is compared to the prices at the time of sale. Still, it is far easier to sell into the trucking trade which services the out of State markets than to 'work' the local market including the ethnic trade.

Some good news: two cooperative ventures, Vermont Quality Meats and Pride of Vermont have attracted members and appear to be making profit in the marketplace. At least two slaughterhouses in Vermont have adopted halal custom, which indicates that the industry is attempting to know its market. Cornell has various programs going which directly speak to producer marketing issues. These organizations effectively trade in ethnic markets and offer members a comfortable way to do so.

Findings: Summary/Conclusions

The original concept of putting producers together with individuals from the ethnic market will not work... because 1) the practice of selling an animal and then allowing the buyer to slaughter on-farm is prohibited by Vermont statute; 2) the State's departments of Agriculture and of Health will not budge regarding change to the current law; and, 3) producers themselves are largely uninterested in dealing with this difficult market on a personal basis.

Still, the market for lamb is an ethnic-based market, and Vermont producers serve it with each and every shipment to auction or to local trucker. The two producer cooperatives are in fact responding to ethnic demand. One producer in Vermont has or will soon complete a facility which will offer USDA inspection for those who wish to slaughter personally. At least two commercial slaughter facilities regularly offer halal service by arrangement. Officials within the departments of Agriculture and Health have encouraged producers to look into using mobile slaughterhouse facilities and appear willing to ease producers through 'ins & outs' of USDA inspection and other regulations associated with processing live animals for public consumption.

The ethnic market is changing somewhat, and it would be well to monitor that. In

the time frame around Christian and Greek Easter holidays just passed, producers noted somewhat reduced demand for lamb in general and lower prices at the auctions. (Producer comments from Cornell's internet list server.) Some producers feel that Islamic populations are again resettling, out of the United States due to Iraq and situations surrounding same. Some say it comes down to money: households are not buying luxuries. I speculate also that the ethnic population is incorporating itself into our culture both by meeting its own needs and by adjusting to the market as the market exists.

Interestingly, adjustment goes both ways. At Middlebury College in 2002, a group of Islamic students managed to put halal meats on the menu by convincing food service folks that standard fare forced them into unwanted vegetarianism.

Some work is being done in New York State, where producers are attempting to meet the ethnic trade on a direct one-to-one basis. Efforts do not seem consistently lucrative, however. To do the same in Vermont, producers would have to abide by various regulations, then convince enough people to supply consistent product on a regular basis, then trust that the Bosnians, Italians, Greeks, and others would come on-time on the specified date..... Probably not going to happen!

Participation Summary

Education & Outreach Activities and Participation Summary

PARTICIPATION SUMMARY:

Education/outreach description:

Ongoing. Articles have been submitted to the VSBA newsletter and one has been published. I have provided information to other researchers on topics related to this project. I have connected producers with other producers, relative to the ethnic markets and need dates and how we might all get our lambs profitably into same. I was instrumental in starting a dialogue with the Department of Agriculture and have continued to work with others to continue the dialogue. I have visited the Islamic Center in Colchester on many occasions to assess ethnic interests, and I continue to seek out folks from the Bosnian community, in particular, to keep that relationship going - perhaps one day we will have a means of meeting their needs.

- [FNE99-247 Final Report](#)
- [Outreach and survey](#)

Project Outcomes

Assessment of Project Approach and Areas of Further Study:

Potential Contributions

It is certainly true that selling direct to a consumer is more lucrative than selling through a middleman, and that the ethnic market is willing to pay a higher price for

an animal than a producer can usually get under other circumstances. However, Vermont's prohibitions are not friendly to this type of direct sale. At present, the ethnic buyer requires on-site kill. Neither the buyer nor the State of Vermont negotiates on this point, making the point moot.

Ethnic market demand is driven BOTH by religious holidays AND by family events: birthdays, personal accomplishments which family and friends celebrate, and so forth. Given the significant ethnic population in Vermont, a consistent market is obtainable and developable, but - at a guess - probably not more than 1000 lambs per year. 1000 lambs is significant at a grassroots level, for the farms and customers trading those lambs. But the prospect of selling 1000 lambs will not excite interest when developing the market means a large investment of time and money.

Dialogue with the Vermont departments of Agriculture and of Health should continue, and producers seek means of underwriting program(s) which serve individuals on both sides of the sales fence.

In order for a mobile (or other) slaughter facility to work, individuals within the ethnic communities must be made aware of the service and convinced that the service can meet their needs. Several sheep producers have contacts within the ethnic community which may be strong enough to gain support for such a facility. It is worth investigating the costs of such a facility and weighing them against the anticipated profits. Follow up with several out-of-state operations would seem a good place to begin: have their efforts been successful? What problems have they encountered?

Continuation of practice investigated:

Certainly it is worthwhile to continue to survey ethnic needs and to inform producers of same. Certainly it is worthwhile to maintain dialogue with State officials re producer needs in this niche market and to seek monies to develop such market

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