

Colorado Quality Lamb: Enhancing the Economic Viability of Local Producers Through Direct Marketing to Food Service Establishments

Final Report for FW00-074

Project Type: Farmer/Rancher

Funds awarded in 2000: \$5,000.00

Projected End Date: 12/31/2004

Region: Western

State: Colorado

Principal Investigator:

[David Myers](#)

Project Information

Abstract:

OBJECTIVES

The objective is to create pathways through which farmers and ranchers can develop partnerships with other marketers - in this case restaurant chefs - as a way to market quality Colorado products directly to consumers.

ABSTRACT

Today's volatile commodity markets are forcing many farmers and ranchers out of a business they have come to love. With their project, David and Nikora Myers say they have shown how small ranchers in the West can still make a living.

"It takes a little work and willingness to persevere through the tough market prices," they write in their project report. "We have found that with an open mind and a willingness to look at new opportunities, we can still make a living at ranching."

To accomplish their goal of selling quality lamb to a variety of customers, the Myers used several tools, including direct contact with individuals and associations, the Internet and priming markets by giving away their products.

SPECIFIC RESULTS

David and Nikora Myers first broached the idea of marketing their lambs directly to chefs at a Farm Bureau meeting in 1999. They met with chefs the following January, delivered lamb for them to sample and worked out details on orders and delivery.

Initially, the Myers set a price of \$1 a pound, live weight, with the chefs paying for processing and sharing a delivery cost of \$250. After a year and a half, they changed the price to carcass weight, which allowed more precise pricing for the chefs. They also set prices with an advantage for bulk purchases: an order of one lamb is priced at \$3.65, two is \$3.40 and three or more is \$3.14. That allowed the Myers to eliminate extra expenses and include them in one price.

During the last two years, the Myers have built relationships with chefs and restaurants, donating lambs for events and functions, spending one Easter with several chefs and attending a house warming where they talked with a number of

chefs and others about buying lamb. They've also supplied lamb for a chef convention at a dude ranch in Powderhorn, Colo., and prepared and donated four legs of lamb to Sheepwagon Days in Craig.

One experience illustrates the ups and downs of direct marketing. They donated 10 racks of lamb that were taken to New York City by a one of their Colorado chefs for a fundraiser at the James Beard Foundation. "It went over well," write the Myers, "and the writer for Bon Appetite Magazine did an article on the event talking about our lamb." While in New York, the chef cultivated contacts with other chefs from California and New York. While the prospects appeared promising, research indicated shipping costs would prohibit benefits for both the Myers and the distant chefs.

To expand their networking, the Myers joined two organizations, Colorado Proud and the Colorado Chef Collaborative, which had told them about the SARE grant program at a previous function. Carrie Balkcom of Chef Collaborative speaks at events and works to ensure the producers and chefs are connected.

In late 2001, their approach of a Safeway butcher about stocking their lambs proved to be a valuable lesson. They learned about red tape and lawyers fees that often preclude small ranchers from such avenues. Indeed, shortly after their inquiry the Myers were told that Safeway had opted to buy its lamb products from Australia.

"We have traveled many roads good and bad, but all informative," write the Myers. "We have endured storms to ensure that this would be an endeavor that would continue because we know that all business opportunities take perseverance. An opportunity like this is a dream come true for young ranchers, and it takes a lot of hard work and time to ensure that the product you are raising and delivering is consistent and of the highest quality possible."

To ensure a steady stream of quality lambs, they purchased an addition 30 head of bred Columbia ewe lambs from Mary Dublow, Riverton, Wyo., feeling they were the best sheep to ensure a proper frame to grow quality lambs.

The Myers have found that it's imperative to use quality feed to grow out the lambs the way the chefs like them. Chefs also like grass-fed lambs and are cautious about buying any that have been fed genetically altered feeds.

The Myers have encountered a couple of hurdles. In addition to the terrorist attacks on the East Coast Sept. 11, which have reduced restaurant business and decreased lamb sales, there is a lack of USDA processing plants. They are exploring the potential for building a small-scale processing plant, which would preclude long trips and the loss of quality such trips engender.

They've also purchased a computer, upon which they have designed business cards and products labels and through which they have explored the Internet to find helpful hints on raising sheep and marketing their products.

POTENTIAL BENEFITS

The Myers see direct marketing as growing opportunity.

"We see this opportunity exploding in the future as every day we encounter new relationships and educate more people on the uses for lamb," they write.

At the same time they're being educated on the value of lamb byproducts. A woman contacted them about buying 10 pounds of lamb fat. Upon inquiring about her planned use of the fat, the Myers learned that the woman's husband's great grandfather had used a salve from the fat to heal cuts and abrasions.

FUTURE RECOMMENDATIONS OR NEW HYPOTHESES

While the Myers offered no suggestions for further research, they themselves are exploring the potential for designing their own products from wool as a way to

increase income.

"We are continually talking with others in hopes of getting more, young and old alike, involved with a new way making agriculture work for them rather than them working for it."

DISSEMINATION OF FINDINGS

In March 2000, the Myers attended a Colorado Proud Chef convention, where they displayed a booth that told about their ranch and the processing plant they use.

The Myers have talked with a number of ranchers in the Craig area and across Colorado about their experience, offering their experiences. During the Colorado Farm Bureau conference in November 2000, they again shared their experiences with like-minded producers.

Research

Participation Summary

Any opinions, findings, conclusions, or recommendations expressed in this publication are those of the author(s) and do not necessarily reflect the view of the U.S. Department of Agriculture or SARE.



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