

Current Need for a Mobile Slaughtering and Processing Unit in Florida for Goats and Sheep

Introduction

The lack of access to USDA inspected slaughter facilities in North and North-Central Florida is a significant barrier for small farmers seeking to increase or diversify livestock production to meet consumer demand. According to the University of Florida's IFAS Extension publication #AN203, there are 24 USDA-inspected livestock slaughter facilities in Florida. Only half of these offer multispecies slaughter, with the capacity to handle beef, pork, goat, and lamb. Access to slaughter for lamb and goat producers is significantly less than for beef producers. Realizing this dilemma, Ms. Sheila Austin (lead investigator), the owner of the Red Boot Goat Farm, LLC (lead investigator), partnered with Florida A&M University (FAMU), the University of Florida (UF), and the Small Business Development Center (SBDC) at University of North Florida (UNF) to submit a Producer Grant to Southern SARE. The overall objective of the study was to evaluate the feasibility of launching a USDA-inspected mobile processing unit (MPU) for goats and other animals in Florida.

Materials and Methods

A semi-structured survey was developed that addressed the objectives of both research teams. The survey was forwarded to the Institutional Research Board at the University of Florida for approval. Once the survey was approved, the investigators created a flyer to invite farmers to participate in this inquiry. The survey was then disseminated through email listservs, extension personnel, goat associations posted in feed stores in five counties in Florida.

Results

One-hundred and fifty-nine surveys were collected. It is also worth noting that sheep

producers submitted almost half of the surveys collected in this study. Since sheep producers encounter similar marketing constraints as goat farmers in Florida, the data were pooled together. The results revealed that most goat and sheep producers (62%) who participated in this investigation were beginning farmers, which meant they had been farming for less than ten years (table 1). Seventy-seven percent of those surveyed also reported to have farmed 20 acres of land or less during this period. Income earned *Beginning Farmers* from farming was another variable evaluated in this study. Annual revenues from 2019 showed a strong tendency toward smaller-sized

Demographics	Response Rate ¹ (%)
Years in Operation (48 responses)	————
Less than 3 Years in operation	12%
3-6 Years in operation	31%
7-9 Years in operation	19%
10+ Years in operation	38%
<10 Years in operation	62%

Table 1. Years Farmed

operations. Thirty-two percent of respondents indicated revenues less than \$1,500, while another 30 percent reported revenues between \$1,500 and \$5,000; in other words, over 60 percent of survey respondents reported annual sales of less than \$5,000.

Other data showed that most of the goat farmers in this study resided in Marion County (n=20), followed by Lake County (n=15) and Alachua County (n=12). Both Columbia and Volusia counties had nine farmers who participated in this inquiry. Sheep producers

overwhelmingly resided in the state's southern region.

The data further showed that respondents had more goats and sheep available

for slaughter in March, and April of 2019, which coincided with several religious or ethnic

inspected facilities (64%) rather than a custom exempt facility (31%).



Figure 1. Number of Animals Available for Slaughter

holidays such as Easter, Passover, Cinco de Mayo Ramadan. Other holidays where meat from goats and sheep was more available accordingly to the survey were Independence Day (July 4th), Eid ul-Fitr (June 5th), and Eid-ul-Adha (August). When producers were asked if their current options for processing meat from

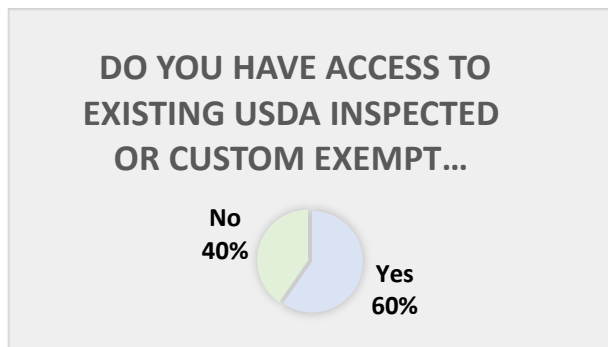


Figure 2. Processing Facilities Meeting Farmer's Need

small ruminants met their needs, most respondents indicated yes (58% [figure 2]). Sixty percent of the participants also reported having access to existing USDA inspected and custom exempt packaging [figure 3]. When respondents were asked if access to Florida's slaughter and processing facilities was a barrier to expanding their goat or sheep operation, 51% stated no, and 49% replied yes to this question. Their responses were almost evenly split. Producers also indicated if given a choice, they preferred to have access to USDA

Discussion

The initial plan for the study was to disseminate surveys in-person and online to stakeholders identified for this project. On March 13th, 2020, the federal government announced Covid-19 as a National Emergency (White House, 2020). In response, state and local governments temporarily closed public facilities to help prevent the spread of the virus. It became evident that in-person surveying was no longer an option, so the team focused on collecting the data online for this study. After initiating this investigation, the team learned another research group at UF was also working on a similar project which offered a unique opportunity to expand collaborative efforts to widen the pool of respondents and make the lack of in-person contact with producers less of a barrier.

Based on the results of this survey, it does not appear that a Mobile Slaughter Unit (MSU) or small USDA slaughter facility is warranted for small ruminants at this time due to the following:

- Current production is limited to farmers with small acreage, which causes production constraints.
- The existing production appears to limit sales.
- Most farmers surveyed were satisfied with their current outlets for selling their goats and sheep.

Although the data suggest that a mobile slaughter facility may not benefit the producers in Florida, it is recommended that the study should be conducted again. It is plausible that the results of a second study may yield different results, given that in-person surveys were not collected due to the pandemic.

Contributors to this article: Angela McKenzie-Jakes (FAMU), Sheila Austin (Red Boot Goat Farm), Mr. Mark Yarick (SBDC at UNF) and William Messina and Chad Carr at UF.