



Iowa S.A.R.E.  
Professional Development  
Mini-Grant Project Report



**Project Title:** North Iowa Local Meat Focus Group

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**Project Consultant:** Deb Lassise

**Local Meat Producers:** See attached list

**Buyers/Retailers:** See attached list

**Project Summary:**

The purpose of this project was improve the relationship between local meet producers and buyers to facilitate local meat purchasing and increased local food revenue in North Iowa.

A list of producer and buyer questions were developed and key informant interviews were conducted by Deb Lassise during December 2016-January 2017. Details of these interviews are summarized in the attached Key Informant Report.

In general producers indicated that they had the capacity to increase production if they felt there was a market and that there was a need to address marketing and infrastructure limitations. All the producers are currently doing their own marketing but there was interest in collaborating to improve awareness, market demand, and address distribution issues.

Buyers were more difficult to get ahold of, which may be an indication of a lack of interest/dedication to local meat sourcing. Those who were interviewed were generally supportive of considering local meat. However, they identified inconsistent supply (it's time-consuming to deal with multiple producers), higher cost, lack of customer demand, and processing certification requirements to be hurdles.

Lack of adequate state certified processors was also noted as an issue; time limitations of this grant did not allow interviews with meat locker owners to get their perspectives. This is an area that could use further investigation.

It was determined that there was a need to improve communications between the buyers and the producers to overcome some of the barriers related to the supply and demand perception. Therefore, a "Meat and Greet" event was held in Clear Lake to on April 5, 2017. The agenda included a review of the project and local food efforts, buyer introductions, producer presentations, and a speed dating segment (see attached Schedule of Events).

Eleven (11) local producers and three (3) buyers attended the event. The buyers were introduced and each producer was given 3-5 minutes to highlight their farm, products, production practices, volume, & availability. Following producer introductions/overviews, there was time for buyers and producers to meet individually to discuss any follow up questions or make appointments for future meetings. There was also an optional discussion about piloting a collaborative booth at farmers markets in Cerro Gordo County (Clear Lake Farmers Market and North Iowa Farmers Market in Mason City).

The speed dating segment morphed into dynamic group discussions with producers and buyers mingling and sharing information. Issues that came to the forefront include:

- the need for a coalition/organization to help provide a steady market and price;

- concern about cost and accessibility to processors. Many in the group are aware of a newly built processing building that is not operating. Information and ideas were exchanged about possibilities with that facility;
- producers knew of two processors who had invested in scalders, suggesting a growing need for whole animal use and an investment in new/additional levels of processing. One processing center (Story City Locker-accessible/used by some in the southern part of the 9 county region) is seen as being very successful; their prices are going up. They are viewed as a resource. This information again suggests a growing demand if processing capacity was available.

Four (4) producers expressed interest in participating in the farmers market collaborative pilot discussed the outline, but upon further consideration three (3) of them were unable to commit to scheduling market dates. Some stated lack of available product to sell and others difficulty scheduling ahead due to other commitments. It is possible with increased notice and communication that this pilot might still be an option for next year. However, one meat producer is attending the Mason City Market and two producers are attending the Clear Lake Market, but are both working independently of each other. Increasing the presence of local meat vendors at Cerro Gordo County farmers markets should help to increase the visibility and availability of local meat.

Follow up surveys were sent to both the buyers and sellers to evaluate the event and the project's overall success. Questions were asked about the connections that were made and whether any business transactions have taken place as a result of the project. In addition, both producers and buyers were asked what ideas they had for improving collaboration between producers and buyers in the future.

**Producer Evaluation Summary (8 responses):**

- 87.5% of producers had increased understanding of HH programs (and strongly valued the HH local food overview presentation)
- 62.5 % of the producers had limited prior connections with the buyers who attended the event, and 50% said they had limited connections to the buyer on the buyer contact list (which was emailed out after the event)
- 62.5% said they have been contacted by at least 1 buyer since the event
- 71.4 of those contacts have led to sales
- 87.5 % indicated that they valued the buyers introductions/contact information provided
- 62.5 % said they only knew a few of the other producers who attended the event, and that they felt it was very valuable to learn more about other local producers in North Iowa
- 87.5% said they talked to at least 1 buyer at the event and they also felt it was beneficial to connect and have discussion with the other producers
- Overall 7/8 producer felt the "speed dating/small group discussions" were valuable (listing market development, identifying buyers, and marketing as some of the benefits)
- 75% of the producers indicated that they learned about new potential sales opportunities
- 62.5% said they participated in the farmers market discussion but did not think they were going to participate in the pilot farmers market project (siting lack of time, summer/job schedule, lack of adequate product, and other FM commitments as the reasons).

When asked "Did this project influence your future decision making regarding producing of local meat products? If so, how?" 5 producers responded.

- Yes, by developing plans to increase my production and space it out to ensure year-round availability of my beef;
- Somewhat. There isn't the demand there yet, so not to overproduce. And there isn't a large demand (for example one restaurant or one retailer large enough to continually sell large amounts of local meat), not enough to sustain even one farmer/producer. So we have to discover new products/niche products in small amounts to possibly catch that buyer's attention;

- We are really happy with where we are right now;
- Many marketing ideas;
- It is important to have consistent product.

One hundred percent 100% of the producers indicated that they would possibly be interested (75% yes, 25% maybe) in attending future meetings if topics of interest/collaboration were identified and funding existed. Some topics that were identified include:

- Developing local market cooperatives (similar to North Iowa Fresh/Food Hub but with meat)
- Tasting event to showcase products
- Opportunities for collaboration (setting standards for quality and production practices)
- Developing group marketing
- Store fronts
- Working with restaurants

Full Survey responses can be sent upon request.

**Buyer Evaluation Summary (4 responses – this was sent to those who attended the event and those who were invited or interviewed as part of the project):**

- 75% of the buyers were not purchasing local meat prior to the project (reasons included: not aware of the opportunity, not sure if they have the right customers base and not familiar with the farmers that could sell to the business);
- Half of the respondents attended the event;
- All respondents indicated that this project improved their local meat awareness at least slightly;
- Respondents sited that this project helped them to become more aware of the producers selling local products and provided a great list of prospects that can sell to businesses;
- 75% of the buyers indicated that they are at least somewhat likely to increase their local meat purchases;
- Half of the buyers have contacted new meat producers that they met at the event and/or from the “meat producers contact list”;
- Half of the buyers indicated that the connection has resulted in business transactions (one indicated multiple transactions with multiple producers);
- Buyers indicated that this project has provided connection and has made them think about trying to serve some local meat;
- One buyer indicated that they still need additional contact and communication with producers in order to make local purchases;
- Buyers listed the following barriers:
  - Constant size and quantity
  - Cost
  - Availability of consistency for regular menu items, only enough for specialty menu
  - Need more information about regulations and animal production practices;
- Buyers indicated interest in additional “Meat and Greet” events and cooperative wholesale options.

**\*\* Coordinator Note:**

- At least five (5) producers (Mossy Cup, Joia, SkyView, GrandView and Twisted River) have made at least one sale that directly related to this event and a number of them have made multiple.
- Two producers are selling regularly at the Clear Lake Farmers Market, one of which was directly linked to the connections made by this project.

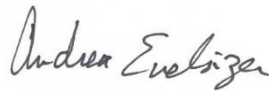
- One producer is also selling at Mason City. It's unknown if it's a direct result of this project, but it is suspected that this project was influential.
- There are at least 2 restaurants (Fieldhouse and Taste) that are sourcing local meat; however Fieldhouse is new and had intended to do so upon opening. Taste has sourced some local in the past but has definitely increased purchasing.

**Project Results:**

- Improved understanding of factors limiting local meat sales in north central Iowa, such as:
  - Market supply vs. demand
  - Certified processing limitations
  - Lack of awareness/understanding of meat buyers, producers and customer;
- Increased communication/relationships between producers and buyers leading to sales and future market opportunities such as farmers markets, restaurant sales, and potential retail opportunities;
- Improved ability for Healthy Harvest to help existing and new meat producers access local markets as a result of improved relationships, trust, and understanding of local meat needs and issues.

**Final invoice attached**

**Date: 7/11/2017**



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**Signature of project coordinator(s)**