



Ecological Farming Association Soquel, CA

Utilize a rapid assessment instead of a comprehensive feasibility study to save both time and money while still providing key answers.

AMS GRANTS AWARDED

Local Food Promotion Program (LFPP) 2014
Planning Grant for \$25,000

Project types: General Market Analysis, Enterprise
Planning, Education & Outreach

HISTORY OF BUSINESS OR PROJECT

Founded in 1981 in Soquel, California, the Ecological Farming Association (Eco-Farm) has operated as a non-profit educational organization to nurture safe, healthy, just, and ecologically sustainable farms, food systems, and communities. They accomplish this by bringing people together for education, alliance building, advocacy, and celebration.

Eco-Farm originally proposed hiring a well-known consultant to conduct a comprehensive feasibility study of a multi-species meat slaughterhouse in the Monterey Bay region (and neighboring counties). Producers in the California central coast region initiated the project with the goal of increasing USDA-inspected processing capacity and wanted to evaluate the economic feasibility of building a new plant.

Eco-Farm asked the Niche Meat Processor Assistance Network (NMPAN) staff for guidance, and they proposed a different, less expensive approach, called

a rapid assessment. The rapid assessment report was not only far less expensive and more accurate but also propelled the group toward more timely, actionable information about a modular, USDA-inspected processing option for pork and poultry. The California Center for Cooperative Development also assisted on the project team by conducting producer surveys and helping with data analysis.

WHY THEY CHOSE TO APPLY FOR AN AMS GRANT/WHAT AN AMS GRANT MEANT FOR THEIR BUSINESS/ORGANIZATION?

Eco-Farm would not have done the study without the support of USDA AMS. Although producers in their region had long requested this research, Eco-Farm did not have the staff expertise or resources to address the needs of livestock/poultry producers. This grant kickstarted a multi-year conversation and added some important data and context to the discussions around potential solutions, allowing producers to network in a more collaborative way.

KEY IMPACTS OF THE GRANT, SHORT-TERM AND LONGER-TERM

According to the Eco-Farm website, the team concluded “there is not sufficient regional production to support a typical full-service slaughter facility. However, a

separate analysis points to enough poultry and pork production in the region to support a “Plant in a Box” (PIB) that could be an alternative to a full production USDA inspected facility.” Some poultry farmers looked into individually installing a PIB on their properties or going in on one together, but their momentum fizzled due to economic constraints, one producer ceasing operations and one farmer not having secured land. Producers in nearby San Mateo and Sonoma counties have also investigated the PIB alternative, but no one has committed.

Some producers surveyed for this study are no longer in business, while other new ones have started. The meat processing space has changed in some key areas over the last few years, so another study may be of interest to see how volume and options have evolved.

Though a PIB has not been developed in this region, the studies developed through this project provided valuable information on what it would take to establish one (animal units, seasonality, labor, etc.). An involved grassfed beef producer stated: “I think the project was useful and there were a lot of connections made in the process.”

WHERE THEY WOULD LIKE TO GO NEXT

Producers in the region still struggle to obtain appropriate slaughter dates for their animals and continue to lack the option of USDA-inspected poultry processing. Given this continued challenge, the report suggested several possible next steps, including:

- Shared Transportation: Reduce hauling costs by coordinating with other producers who are traveling to and from processors;
- Active Scheduling: Take advantage of the “slow season” at local processing facilities by adjusting feeding and finishing schedules;
- Organize: Work with other producers to streamline processing and provide steady, reliable throughput to processors. Larger, steadier volumes may allow price of service negotiation;
- Increased Sales = Increased Production: Expand marketing and distribution to increase livestock numbers. More livestock equals more demand for processing services;
- Financial Investment: Work with local processors to help finance the changes the local industry wants to see;

- Communication: What do you need to improve your relationship with local processors? What do they need from you or elsewhere?
- Increased Commitment from Buyers: Processors need producer commitment and producers need buyers to commit. How much meat will they buy, at what price, over what period of time? Can producers sell the whole carcass through those sales channels? Does that translate into viable economics for producers?

REFERENCES/LINKS

<https://eco-farm.org/conference/2016/session/discussion-group-central-coast-meat-producers>

[https://eco-farm.org/sites/default/files/Survey results Jan 2016 presentation.pdf](https://eco-farm.org/sites/default/files/Survey%20results%20Jan%202016%20presentation.pdf)

[https://eco-farm.org/sites/default/files/Central Coast Project Report FINAL %28Oct.2015%29.pdf](https://eco-farm.org/sites/default/files/Central%20Coast%20Project%20Report%20FINAL%20Oct.2015%29.pdf)

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NICHE MEAT PROCESSOR
ASSISTANCE NETWORK

This case study was created in fulfillment of a cooperative research agreement between the Marketing Services

Division of the Agricultural Marketing Service of the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA AMS) and Oregon State University’s Niche Meat Processor Assistance Network (NMPAN).

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