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Federal Inspection Opens up World of Opportunity for Alabama Producers

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(April 1, 2010) While Alabama has not been a large state in terms of sheep population, new ideas and marketing opportunities, both revolving around federally inspected processing, might soon change that.

While boasting a good-sized population of meat goats, hair sheep are now gaining in popularity in Alabama, as they are in much of the Southeast, due to their compatibility with the climate of the state. However, growing sheep numbers means the growing need for processing facilities and a market. With the hard work of a unique cooperative in the northern part of the state and a direct-buying processor in the south, lamb is now gaining popularity among consumers and bringing returns for producers.

Alabama Agriculture A+ Marketing Association

"There is an opportunity for growth..."

The whole idea began with rabbits.

The Alabama Agricultural A+ Marketing Association (A+), with headquarters in the Northwest Alabama area, first started as a group of rabbit producers who came together to market meat and pursue biological markets for rabbit blood which has high research value.

According to J.C. Holt, A+ president and Alabama Meat Goat and Sheep Producers member, his ultimate goal with beginning the work with rabbit producers was to provide them a market and be able to help the Children's Hospital and other child medical research networks, by donating the blood for research and providing other support when possible. It soon became apparent that sheep and goat producers in the area could also fit into this plan, and they were incorporated into the cooperative as well.

The biggest obstacle for getting the cooperative up and successful was the availability of a federally inspected plant within a reasonable distance to process the animals. To solve this, Holt was able to build on a relationship with Sybil Wright, outreach coordinator, Food Safety and Inspection Service, to work with a local facility who had interest in becoming federally inspected.

Cox Butcher Shop, owned by Renee and Adam Cox, started out

with just the family processing their own meat. Soon people were asking for their services, so they purchased equipment and opened under state inspection, offering processing of beef, lamb, goat and a variety of other meats.

When approached by Holt and A+ to become federally inspected, Cox said they jumped at the chance when they heard the goals of the group.
"Our vision was to help," she said.

Today, they have been processing lamb for about a year-and-a-half, averaging 10 per week during peak season, and offering the usual lamb cuts, as well as specialty products such as lamb burger and Moroccan-spiced lamb sausage as well.

Also involved in this venture is Northwest Alabama Resource Conservation and Development (RC&D), who has been instrumental in furthering the marketing of the lamb products that come out of the facility.

"J.C. came to the board and requested assistance. We feel that the local people have the best ideas on how to solve problems within their own community, and we were thrilled about the USDA (U.S. Department of Agriculture)-inspected facility. The key was having that USDA-inspected facility," says Coordinator Charlie Meeks.
"Without it we couldn't go through restaurants and other markets like that."

With work from Holt and the RC&D, product processed from the facility has been placed in restaurants, grocery stores and used at events across the state. Meeks also relates that the group has been able to parlay a farmer's market promo into representation in five different markets this year.

Today, the cooperative currently provides service for around eight lamb producers, according to Holt. As importantly, gaining a federal-inspection approval for Cox's Butcher Shop has provided the community with jobs, as they have had to add four more employees to keep up with demand, which, for the lamb product, has grown from a list of five customers to four pages full of those who buy from the processor alone.

"These are jobs that are producing a product," says Meeks.

And both the cooperative and the processor look to expand.

"There is opportunity for growth, and we have now gotten to where we can help the farmer," relates Holt, adding that there may be a market for sheep blood in the research sector, which he is hoping to explore to help the Children's Hospital.

"Our goal at A+ is to help the small farmers, give back to the community and help the Children's Hospital, and we are going to get there," Holt relates.

For Meeks and RC&D, the venture creates endless possibilities for the region, both for the producers and for the economy.

"It does create jobs, it does have locally produced food, and there are a lot of advantages of small ruminants on small acreage," says Meeks.

D&W Meat Processing

"We have the capacity to process more..."

In the deep South, Newton, Ala., another processor was able to

take the steps toward becoming a federally inspected facility and has opened possibilities for producers in that region, as well.

D&W Meat Processing, owned by Dave and Wade Hussey, has been processing lamb and goats since the facility started around two years ago, but is poised to take on new markets having become federally inspected around six months ago. It processes deer, goat, rabbit, lamb and a variety of other meats, though lamb is not overly abundant in the area.

Much of the sheep in the area go into the ethnic market; however, Joey Sanderson, manager, says the facility directly buys hair sheep from three or four producers in the region, and processes on average eight to 10 lambs a month. That meat is offered at the processor's retail store and new markets are being explored through promoting the products at events.

Also, the company can ship meat anywhere now that it is federally inspected, so it custom processes and ships lamb products. Sanderson says he is working on a Web site to make products that much more available.

The facility is hoping to buy from more producers as it has a capacity to hang 300 head, with an emphasis on locally grown lambs.

"We try to get word out and let people know what we are looking for. What we have now for producers are few and far between," he says.

But demand, he says is starting to grow, as customers from the military base Fort Rucker, are beginning to recognize lamb and are coming to the retail store at the facility as repeat customers. Currently, D&W is offering the traditional lamb cuts as well as specialty items like summer sausage, jalapeno cheese summer sausage, smoked sausage and a smoke snack stick, all processed and smoked, if needed, on site.

"The retail case has been pretty strong," Sanderson says, relating that the leg steak, chops, whole legs and ground lamb are popular items. "Our summer sausage is growing and we sell a lot of smoked sausage," he adds.

In addition, he says that increasingly his customers are asking about the origins of the lamb itself.

"I get asked a lot about hormones and all natural," he says.

As well as expanding the facility's producer base and expanding into new markets, Sanderson says there are tentative plans in the works to start a livestock auction adjacent to the facility, providing a built-in consumer base at the restaurant and more access to producers and livestock. Though, this is still in the planning phase.

"Really, right now we are just trying to advertise and get the word out. We can definitely process more because we have the room to hang them," Sanderson says.

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