

# Helping Remove Barriers to Local Meat Processing

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Ask meat vendors at a farmers' market what their biggest headache is, and they likely will say getting their animals processed. If those vendors are selling certified organic meat and poultry, the challenge is greater still.

Although slaughterhouses aren't always close or available when farmers need them, there are efforts being made to address that, and [resources to help small-scale meat and poultry producers](#) meet the growing demand for food fresh from the farm.

The [Niche Meat Processor Assistance Network](#), or NMPAN, is connecting people across the country with information, tools and each other. The organization is part of the Cooperative Extension System's [eXtension](#), an Internet-based collaborative learning service that consolidates the resources of the land grant universities.

Co-coordinators Lauren Gwin and Arion Thiboumery launched NMPAN three years ago. As a doctoral candidate, Gwin studied barriers to local grassfed and organic meat production and supply chains.

"I was working for University of California Cooperative Extension, and processing kept coming up as an issue," said Gwin, who is now at Oregon State University and works with meat producers and processors in Oregon. "I found myself being the person keeping track of what different people in different parts of the state were doing on the processing question, how they could get access to processing, the venues needed. I realized it would be very valuable to have a network (of people) around the country who were also looking at this."

Arion Thiboumery, vice president of Lorentz Meats, a processor in Minnesota and an Extension Associate at Iowa State, had been working with small processors in Iowa for a number of years when Gwin contacted him. The two put together an advisory board, got a starter grant from Heifer International, and began posting information online about small processing. They also recruited affiliates in different states.

These affiliates are now available in almost 40 states, and allow the co-coordinators to link people who need help with those who can offer it, such as extension staff members, state departments of agriculture and markets with experience in small meat processing.

"We're trying to coordinate information and kind of act like that conduit hub, with the webinars and the resources on line, the listserve, some of the e-updates," said Thiboumery of the network's efforts. "We respond to emails and phone calls, and cross-pollinate that information."

Information takes different shapes on NMPAN's site.

There are case studies, such as [one that focuses on Smucker's Meats](#), a small USDA-inspected, family-owned slaughtering plant in Pennsylvania that handles about 45 head of cattle, five bison, 5-10 hogs and occasionally sheep and goats each week.

A detailed portrait of the company offers information about its services, prices and experiences as an example to others who might want to expand their own operations or start a facility from scratch. A Q&A conversation with Smucker's owners illustrates how farmers and the facilities they rely upon can best help each other and coordinate their efforts.

The listserve is very active, pooling traffic from regulators, people who work for non-profits that serve the sector, academics, and people working in plants. Other NMPAN materials include a newsletter that goes to a list of 400 and is forwarded to at least another 100 people.

Gwin said an affiliate printed out 50 copies of a recently published business plan and guide book, written for those who want to start a processing business or revamp an existing one. NMPAN also offers live and archived webinars.

"We really try in those webinars to be as concrete and applied as one can be," said Thiboumery, "acknowledging that you're talking over a computer to people all across the country. You're not hands-on with somebody right in front of you. We continue to get very positive feedback."

Hands-on help is fostered through NMPAN's affiliates.

"There are people who can help with HACCP (Hazard Analysis and Critical Control Point) planning, and people who can help you think about the processes you're going to use at your plant," said Gwin.

State by state, efforts to help develop small scale meat processors are taking shape, as consumers increasingly seek alternatives to the supermarket.

Montana is trying to harmonize regulations that affect small processors. North Carolina was the site of the recent [Carolina Meat Conference](#), which brought together local processors, regulators and others to address the needs of this growing segment of the meat industry.

NMPAN strives to fill in the gaps between what trade associations, like the American Association of Meat Processors, and regulators such as the U.S. Department of Agriculture's Food Safety Inspection Service offer processors. Currently, NMPAN is focusing on the business end of matters, trying to develop tools to help processors become more financially stable.

"One of the things we talk about is we need more processors," said Gwin, "and in some parts of the country that's actually true. But in some parts of the country small processors are struggling just to stay afloat because it's a very difficult industry to be in. We're just trying to keep putting together tools and get them out there that will help small processors do what they do, and will help producers find and work with existing processors and, when necessary, help them build facilities."

The [Center for Agricultural Development and Entrepreneurship](#), or CADE, is a regional organization located in central New York State supporting small scale meat processors. CADE's director, Chris Harmon, is also a livestock farmer.

"When I became the executive director," said Harmon, "I recognized there were some gaps in the areas of slaughterhouses, (but) that does not necessarily mean that we need a lot more slaughterhouses."

One issue is seasonality. When most farmers want to get their animals processed in the fall, the slaughterhouses are full.

"We don't want to feed them through the wintertime, and their condition is really great at that point," said Harmon. "Many slaughterhouses suffer from a lack of work from about February through June. So there's a need to develop markets where animals are taken in on a weekly basis, regardless of the season."

CADE was established in 1991 to address the issue of vanishing family farms in central New York. While the group's work has often focused on developing value-added products and businsees to support dairy farmers, Harmon's expertise is put to use in livestock operations.

Since 2009, CADE has been working with the New York Farm Viability Institute to build the capacity of livestock processing in that region. For a time the work was interrupted by state budget problems, but because CADE gathered local resources, work was able to proceed. One notable example of its efforts is Larry's Custom Meats, which just received its USDA license at a new facility.

Larry Althiser has a quarter century of experience as a butcher, and since 2002 ran a USDA custom exempt plant in the town of Hartwick. Farmers use this type of processor when customers buy an animal, or a portion of an animal, such as a half side of beef. Because the plant was not USDA-certified, however, farmers could not use it to prepare and package meats for sale to restaurants or grocery stores, or for direct sales at farmers markets. Althiser decided to address this limit when his septic system started to fail.

He purchased 60 acres across the road from his plant and started to build a larger, USDA-licensed slaughterhouse. Now his three daughters are interested in carrying on the family business. One already works with him, and the other two are planning to study animal science.

CADE provided Althiser technical assistance in business planning, designing the plant, securing loans, food safety planning, working with USDA inspectors, and more. His new 6,000 square-foot facility can handle up to 5,000 animals per year, and there are now over 30 farmers on a waiting list to use it.

The work with Althiser is not done, however. CADE leveraged funding from the NYS Farm Viability Institute to win a grant from the Appalachian Regional Commission (ARC) for meat marketing.

"Now that we've helped build the infrastructure and capacity of the slaughterhouses and the ability to process, then what you really need to do is ensure that you have farmers who have solid markets for years to come," said Harmon.

"That's the goal, to develop the meat marketing end of it, and they'll start to increase sizes of their herds with the increased processing capacity. The final key is to start to access more of the 3 million acres of fallow land in upstate New York. There's a lot of ag land out there that's not in production that could be used to raise beef and sheep to be processed in these facilities. You've got New York City and Boston, and the whole Eastern seaboard -- you've got a tremendous demand for local products, regional products. So you've got this demand, and you've got this land, the question is how you facilitate all that."

Neither NMPAN nor CADE, however, have the muscle to wrestle another major challenge that Lauren Gwin has identified, which is the cost to consumers of pasture-raised meat and poultry.

"The meats that producers are putting into local and regional food systems tend to be more expensive, so that's always a challenge," said Gwin. "As long as people can buy cheap meat, that's going to be a challenge in the marketplace."