



DETWEILER MEATS

Illinois Grass-fed Value Chain Case Study: Processing

Developed by Delta Institute and Pasture Project

Overview

Detweiler Meats is a full-service butcher shop and USDA-inspected processing facility in Crofton, Kentucky that opened in 2017. Detweiler Meats is owned and operated by Norman Detweiler in partnership with his father Ronnie. While not located in Illinois, Detweiler Meats is located approximately 180 miles from the border and is able to work with Illinois producers.

Operation

Norman Detweiler, 32, started Detweiler meats with his father, 55, in 2017 by renovating an existing building in Crofton, Kentucky. They custom process beef and pork, have a full-service butcher and retail shop, and raise their own hogs on site. Ronnie wanted to have greater direct-to-consumer access for their hog operation, and the processing facility in addition to their retail shop gave Ronnie a complete farm-to-table business. Detweiler currently has four full-time and two part-time employees.

The facility can process a maximum of four cattle daily and is busiest in the fall/winter and mid-summer months. Detweiler estimates that grass-fed beef accounts for less than 5% of their beef processing annually. Detweiler charges 60 cents/pound custom processing on carcass weight but producers must pay 75 cents/pound for a USDA inspected stamp. Detweiler doesn't charge a different processing rate for grass-fed products as there is no additional hassle or expense to process grass-fed beef for the operation. He does

charge an additional \$25 per head if the cattle are over 30 months of age. This is due to the extra care and handling required by government regulation for older animals, because of increased probability of mad cow disease. Average wait times for farmers are between one and six months, but Detweiler doesn't require a minimum head or weight count. Detweiler advertises their services via newspaper ads, catalogs, Facebook, and word-of-mouth. Detweiler would be interested in selling more grass-fed beef in his retail butcher shop but doesn't see the demand from customers.

Challenges and Barriers

Detweiler explains that while accessing capital for his facility was not a challenge, lack of infrastructure was a barrier to starting their business. They had to make do with facilities available to them at the time, renovating as necessary. Looking back, Detweiler believes it would have been easier to build a new facility. Consistent volume has been perhaps the most significant barrier, says Detweiler, but they are also limited within their current facility size. Detweiler would like to use more automated equipment to move more volume, but they don't have room in their facility for the equipment. Expanding processing facilities requires consistent volume, but a facility cannot source consistent volume without a sufficiently large facility.

Another barrier Detweiler faces is working with USDA to keep his processing plant federally inspected and certified. In order to maintain a federally inspected

processing plant, Detweiler must keep up to date with regulations, meet certain requirements, and process extensive paperwork, all of which is time consuming.

Detweiler says overall, he has good relationships with his farmer customers and is seeing new customers frequently. Detweiler explains it is difficult at times to meet the expectations of farmers. A farmer may bring in a 1,000-pound animal to be processed, be upset and confused when the processed output is of a lower weight. Detweiler believes these issues could be resolved with increased communication between farmers and processors and farmer education about animal processing.

Growth

Detweiler says he would like to expand his processing operation, but lack of facility space is a barrier to expansion. Detweiler sees the lack of good quality grass in the region as a bottleneck to growing the grass-fed beef sector on a regional scale. He notes specifically that the sage grass in his surrounding region lacks the nutritional density to raise beef cattle. Detweiler is confident that his retail butcher shop and meat counter will expand but would like to get more accounts from the wholesale market.