

Head Back to School

USDA program may offer niche beef market.

by Barb Baylor Anderson, field editor

If you're looking for niche marketing opportunities, you may want to check out your local school cafeteria. USDA's relatively new Farm to School program connects schools with local farmers and ranchers in an effort to serve healthy meals in schools, improve student nutrition, provide agriculture health and nutrition education, and support local and regional farmers.

"Farm to School is open to all types of beef producers," says Vanessa Zajfen, Farm to School regional lead and local meat specialist for the Midwest. The *Healthy, Hunger-free Kids Act of 2010* created the Farm to School program. "There is room to grow."

Farm to School programs exist in every state. They currently are most numerous on the East and West coasts, Minnesota and Wisconsin. For 2011-2012, schools purchased \$385 million in local food from farmers, ranchers, fishermen, and food processors and manufacturers. The USDA Farm to School Census found that more than 600 school districts bought local meat or poultry that year, and 56% of school districts reported that they would buy even more in the future, especially school districts in colder climate zones that typically buy and serve more local meat.

USDA Secretary Tom Vilsack highlighted the program this fall.

"An investment in the health of America's students through Farm to School is also an investment in the farmers and ranchers who grow the food and an investment in the health of local economies," he says.

Any size district or budget can be part



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of the Farm to School program, adds Carol Smathers, Ohio Farm to School state lead, Ohio State University Extension. In Ohio, they focus on increasing consumption through community, cafeteria and classroom efforts. Vilsack adds that when students have experiences such as tending a school garden or visiting a farm, they're more likely to waste less and learn appreciation for American farmers and ranchers.

Participate in learning

Granville High School, Granville, Ohio, has found that to be the case. Environmental science educator Jim Reding says the school has gone from 22%-25% of students eating lunch in the cafeteria to 60%. "Much less is thrown away," he says.

Granville does not have an agriculture program, but environmental-sciences students pushed for grant funding about eight years ago to put in a school garden. They have supplied produce to the school cafeteria for the last three years. They also raise tilapia at the school, and their foodservice provider contracts with local pork and local beef producers for other meat-protein needs.

Steve Finlayson, FH Farms near Granville, is the local beef producer. Finlayson's commercial herd includes Angus, Herefords and black baldies. He has been raising grass-fed beef for more than 20 years and continues to fine-tune genetics to produce cattle that perform well on grass and hay. He has supplied ground beef for the school lunch program for two years.

Finlayson learned about Farm



to School because he raises hay on a field owned by nearby Denison University. When university officials talked about raising food for students on the acreage instead, Finlayson suggested they continue to raise hay and feed cattle and serve the beef. Finlayson no longer provides beef to Denison since that would have required costly certifications. Instead, Finlayson got involved with Granville schools. Granville was willing to feed students the higher-value lean protein instead of commodity ground beef. The meat is locally processed by a facility licensed and inspected by the Ohio Department of Agriculture.

“Local production is a selling point for farmers. Students and parents are generally not aware of the source of school lunch food, and they appreciate the local aspect,” says Reding. “We have raised awareness of agriculture and healthy, local food in our district over the last several years. Some of my students even have chosen careers in agriculture as a result of this experience.”

Finlayson is pleased with the arrangement. “This has been a good piece of business for us. We have increased our marketing base for freezer beef with several of the school’s families, and we have been able to market our older cows that had little value otherwise,” he says. “We enjoy it. It has been profitable, but producers should sharpen their pencils. It’s a limited opportunity.”

Follow instructions

“Anecdotal evidence suggests the majority of cattlemen and ranchers participating in Farm to School tend to be small- to mid-scale, raising 100% grass-fed, grass-fed and grain-finished, or dairy cattle,” says Zajfen. “Ranchers and slaughter facilities that the USDA Farm to School team has spoken with say sales from such accounts represent up to 5% of their total business. Partnerships between ranchers, slaughter facilities and processors are key to success.”

Zajfen says producers must work with a local School Food Authority (SFA). The group has legal authority to operate USDA-approved child nutrition programs and dictates beef qualities and production practices that are acceptable for the program. Cattlemen interested in connecting with a local SFA should seek representatives out at local food events or talk to state agencies, such as state departments of agriculture or education. Existing local Farm to School groups or food policy councils may also be knowledgeable about what is available in their communities.

“It also never hurts to approach a school district’s SFA directly. There is nothing wrong with picking up the phone and asking questions or walking through the door with samples,” she says.



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“The greatest barriers to serving local beef have been limited slaughter and processing infrastructure in ranching communities, limited (but growing) demand for local meats from SFAs, food-safety concerns primarily related to handling raw products, and general confusion around the rules and regulations governing the sale of local meat to school districts.”

Ultimately, beef producers who want to participate must go through the local school district’s bidding process. Zajfen says all

bidding processes are conducted differently, depending on state and school district rules, regulations and policies. She advises producers to read and understand all that is required before bidding, and to provide SFAs with any additional information about their business operations and support of a district’s Farm to School program.

Do your homework

A number of resources are available for learning more about Farm to School, how to get involved and even applying for funding assistance. The Farm to School Team has published a fact sheet that answers many questions. “Local Meat in Schools: Increasing Opportunities for Small and Mid-sized Ranchers and Fishermen,” can be accessed at www.fns.usda.gov/sites/default/files/f2s/local-meat-fact-sheet.pdf.

Grants are available for producer groups and ranchers. USDA grants and loan information and details about upcoming events and conferences in different regions are found at www.fns.usda.gov/farmtoschool/. USDA’s Toolkit for Small-scale and Mid-sized Livestock and Poultry Ranchers is located at www.usda.gov/documents/livestockpoultrytool.pdf.

Other resources include local philanthropic organizations that might support Farm to School, which are listed at the National Farm to School Network site, www.farmtoschool.org. The MarketMaker website — foodmarketmaker.com — also can connect producers with resources.

Producers also may contact Vanessa Zajfen, Farm to School regional lead and local meat specialist for the Midwest, at vanessa.zajfen@fns.usda.gov or 312-353-0683.



Editor’s Note: A former National Junior Angus Board member, Barb Baylor Anderson is a freelancer from Edwardsville, Ill.

