

Small-Scale Slaughterhouses Needed for Sustainably Raised Meats

One of the greatest impediments for farmers who want to raise meat animals on a small-scale is access to slaughterhouses and markets for their meat products.

As we move to more sustainable farming practices, returning animals to the landscape is key. It also means removing animals out of confinements (CAFOs). Farm animals are an essential component in the sustainable, regenerative, whole-farm systems that show the greatest promise for providing income to farmers, improving soil health, and mitigating climate change while meeting the food needs of both current and future generations.

Commonsense policy solutions

Several policy initiatives will greatly improve the ability of farmers to raise livestock independent of the CAFO model, including:

- Providing access to slaughterhouses for small-scale farmers who sustainably raise animals.
- Creating local farmer-seller cooperatives so groups of farmers can collectively move their products to market, including slaughtering, processing, storage, transportation, marketing services, as well as selling their products through meat lockers, butcher shops, and retail shops.
- Initiating anti-trust actions against the largest companies and other actions to make the markets more competitive. The net result is that costs for inputs are high while the prices paid to farmers remain low. It is time to bring the market back into the marketplace. Iowa's attorney general can initiate the anti-trust actions in the state.
- Encouraging a review and the subsequent revision of state laws that are barriers to the expansion of sustainable farming practices.
- Breaking the vertical integration in the farming industry, where one company can own all of the steps in producing a food product, such as owning the animals, owning the feed mills, and owning the slaughterhouses.
- Establishing a moratorium on new CAFOs and expansion of existing CAFOs.
- Creating local farmers markets where locally grown, sustainable products can be sold and purchased.
- Encouraging stores to carry locally grown products.
- Allowing preferences for local, sustainable foods when government institutions, such as schools and hospitals, purchase foods.



Photo by USDA Scott Bauer

- Developing programs to provide improved and non-discriminatory access to credit that can be used to farm sustainably.
- Developing training programs for butchers and owners and managers of small-scale slaughtering and processing facilities.
- Changing federal laws so that small-scale slaughterhouses and processing plants that sell to intra-state customers are subjected to state inspection programs of animals and carcasses, overseeing humane slaughter procedures, ensuring proper sanitation during the butchering processes, and ensuring that the unused body parts are disposed of responsibly. Allowing state regulations on line speed. Allowing state programs that respect animals, workers, and consumers.
- Developing programs that ensure that the farmer is paid for the labor and capital investment in producing the animals.
- Ensuring that workers in slaughterhouses and processing plants are fairly compensated for their labor and have sick leave available to them.
- Allowing the meat products to be labeled so that the consumer knows how the animals were raised and processed.



Photo by Pam Mackey Taylor

Background on the problem

Consolidation of America's food supply is old news. Yet the concentration of companies in sector after sector of the agriculture market has had serious side-effects. Markets run best when there is competition among a large number of businesses. "In standard economic theory, a market stops being competitive when the four largest players control over 40 percent – what is known as a 'four-firm concentration ratio' (CR4) of 40."¹ A number of agricultural markets have reached the point where they are no longer competitive, including beef packers, pork packers, and broilers and turkey production.

Market concentration has moved the growing of food away from sustainable methods, toward the industrial model. Market concentration has driven the production of livestock to the confined animal feeding-style (CAFO) of raising animals, where thousands of animals are housed in large buildings.

In confinement operations (CAFOs which are also called factory farms), the farmer does not own the animals; instead the farmer is under contract to house and care for the animals. The animals are either owned by integrators who then are responsible for working with slaughterhouses or they are owned by vertically-integrated operations that control everything from breeding to slaughter to processing the carcasses into cuts of meat.

It has resulted in few marketing opportunities and no or very limited access to slaughterhouses for independent farmers who are not contracted to integrators or the large vertically-integrated companies. Additionally if one company is lax in implementing health and safety measures, significant percentages of the public can be sickened. Finally the largest of the companies are able to dictate the rules that all of the others in the industry must follow, which can be detrimental to public health and safety and can be costly to the consumer.

Making matters worse, across the state, Iowans feel they are under siege from the CAFO industry that is polluting the air, polluting the water, and destroying peaceful existence in rural areas.

¹ CAFO (Concentrated Animal Feeding Operation): The Tragedy of Industrial Animal Factories, edited by Daniel Imhoff, published by Foundation for Deep Ecology, 2010, page 85

CAFOs are the source of two potent greenhouse gases – methane and nitrous oxide. Livestock manure, particularly from confinement operations, is a source of nitrous oxide. The largest source of animal-produced methane is in the liquid manure stored in lagoons, manure storage structures, and holding pits used in swine CAFOs. If the manure is composted, there is little methane produced. Animals that are allowed to pasture produce little methane. Deep-bedding of animals also produces little methane.

A better way

Sustainable agriculture involves including animal agriculture as part of an integrated system that returns nutrients to the land without polluting streams and endangering the health of the people who live and work in the area.

- Adopting animal-raising techniques that include managed grazing, deep-bedding animals and composting manure.
- Raising animals on grass allows them to spread their own manure and harvest their own feed while reducing the amount of energy spent on farm equipment operation and the amount of greenhouse gas emissions.
- Raising animals alternatively in deep-bedding reduces the release of greenhouse gas emissions into the atmosphere, along with creating litter that can be used as a soil amendment.



Photo by USDA Keith Weller

Markets can work for the good of all only when government ensures economically competitive markets, levels the economic playing field, and ensures the basic rights of all. Small-scale farmers raising animals should be able to compete with the large corporations that are dominating the meat industry today.

One of the most important elements of sustainable farming is the return of small-scale slaughterhouses so that farmers across the state can get their animals to market. As the COVID-19 pandemic has shown us, consolidating slaughtering into large plants has put our food at risk. Having more small-scale slaughterhouses and butcheries would add resiliency into the meat processing industry.

Improving and increasing the network of small-scale slaughterhouses and butcheries is a win for all Iowans:

- For farmers who want to raise a few livestock or breeds that are not preferred by the large processors.
- For local communities that host the slaughterhouses and butcheries
- For entrepreneurs who want to build a business or for existing butcheries or slaughterhouses that want to expand or upgrade their operations
- For people who want to become butchers and want training in the profession
- For families who will have good paying jobs
- For consumers who want an alternative of locally produced and processed food.