FROM PASTURE TO PLATE

When most people hear farm to school, they generally think about fresh produce. In the small town of Danville, farm to school looks a little different. Agricultural education teacher and Future Farmers of America (FFA) coordinator Gary Gray and food service director Marcia Tramel struck up a conversation during an in-service day—their school was set up to raise FFA beef, not vegetables. Could FFA cattle raised on school grounds become a source of protein in school meals?

Tramel's plan was to buy the beef using micro-purchasing, a USDA-sanctioned procurement method which allows CNDs to make smaller purchases under a certain threshold. In order for the school to serve the grass-fed locally-grown beef in the cafeteria, Gray had to meet a series of United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) regulations. The meat had to be processed at a facility with a full-time USDA inspector present and contain no more than 20% fat. Once the meat had been processed, inspected, and approved, it was delivered to the school. Cafeteria staff pressed 772 pounds of ground beef into 3,000 four-ounce patties. Once a week for five weeks, the aroma of homegrown, homemade, scratch-seasoned burgers filled the cafeteria.

▲ *Beef cattle graze on pasture. Whereas USDA prime grade meat is fattened for quality steaks, beef for school consumption must be no more than 20% fat.*

The mascot-inspired "Little John" burgers were a hit, enticing students to stay and eat a meal made in the cafeteria, despite having the option to leave campus. Each subsequent week in which the local burgers were served, increasing numbers of students stayed on campus. >>

The school was able to turn the 772 pounds of meat into 3,000 four-ounce patties complete with homemade low-sodium seasoning.

A LEARNING EXPERIENCE

>> Gray intended to provide a second calf for the cafeteria, but its fat content exceeded the 20% ratio requirement. The second calf provided an important learning opportunity for Gray and the FFA students. Various breeds of cattle, along with particular raising practices, are better suited for meeting USDA school meal regulations. As calves for school consumption must be leaner, they are typically "grass-finished", that is, they graze on pasture until they have reached the appropriate weight of roughly 1200-1300 pounds. For this reason, Gray recommends raising steers as they tend to put on less fat than heifers.

This model can be adopted by any independent beef producer with an understanding of USDA guidelines.

The school has learned from the experience and is planning for a year-round supply of locally-sourced, grass-finished beef by providing 9-10 calves per year to the school cafeteria. Instrumental to Danville's success is the cooperation of the FFA chapter which purchases cows and semen, and trains students to do all the work involved in raising the calves; and the school, which owns the farm, pays the FFA chapter for the processed meat, and provides agriculture curriculum. Gray also notes that this model can be adopted by any independent beef producer.

▲ ***Cafeteria staff press the school-raised beef by hand. Later, a new cattle processor in Pottsville provided its own press, which lightened their workload.***

*Many thanks go to the following at Danville: **Gary Gray,** FFA advisor and ag teacher; **Janet Minnie,** food service manager; and **Marcia Tramel,** food service director.*

Key Steps for Farmers

- **Approach**: Break the mindset that a finished calf is a fat calf.
- **Agree**: Draw up a contract with the school; confirm that the school will buy the meat at USDA market price on the day the calf is processed as long as requirements are met.
- **Lean Meat:** Ensure the calf will be less than 20% fat; this requires a higher grass diet. Be wary of intramuscular fat.
- **Processing:** Confirm who is butchering the meat and how.
- **Back-Up Plan:** Have a secondary buyer in place for meat; if it exceeds 20% fat content, school cannot purchase.

Key Steps for School Cafeterias

- **Purchasing Language:** Micro-purchasing means you don't have to go through the bid process.
- **Price:** Use the USDA website market reports to arrive at a price for the day the calf is processed.
- **Transport:** Ensure you have a refrigerated vehicle to transport the meat from the processing plant to school.
- **Equipment:** Make sure you have enough storage for the amount of beef, and know whether or not you'll need patty presses.
- **Nutrition:** Beef must be less than 20% fat and low-sodium.
- **Marketing:** Advertise that the product was raised by students!