

Profile from the Field

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Developing a Women and Farmer-Led Meat Cooperative

Project Titles: Developing a Woman Farmer Butchering and Meat Processing Cooperative plan for Southern Wisconsin

Coordinator: April Prusia

Location: Blanchardville, Wisconsin

SARE Grant \$: \$20,175

Duration: 2017-2019

To read the full project reports, go to www.sare.org/projects and search for project number FNC17-1094

Wisconsin needs more butchers. That's what April Prusia, Betty Anderson, and Bethany Emond Storms determined during their farmer-led research project in 2017. The three livestock producers raise beef, pork, poultry, and goats in south central Wisconsin. While they all have big dreams of charcuterie plates made with their meat, they lack processing options in the area and other producers share their concerns.

"There's increasing unmet demand from area farmers for meat processing, especially a facility specializing in no stress kill, organic, and artisan-cured meats," said April Prusia. "The current facilities available are only Wisconsin licensed and have long wait times."

Prusia of Dorothy's Range in Blanchardville, Anderson of the Old Smith Place near Brodhead, and Emond Storm of Blanchardville put their heads together to work on a solution. The three women farmers applied for a \$20,175 NCR-SARE Farmer Rancher grant to explore meat processing options in south central Wisconsin and figure out ways to bring more women into the industry.

"While women farmers are increasing in number at over 20 percent in the last 20 years, we remain significantly underrepresented in the meat industry," said Prusia. "This statistic manifests itself locally with no female leadership in the current meat processing facilities."

Assessing the feasibility and demand for a cooperatively owned, federally licensed, women-farmer led mobile slaughtering unit or retail butcher shop in south central Wisconsin was the task before them, so they got to work. They visited local grocery stores and butchers to determine the existing resources available in their counties.



Livestock producers Betty Anderson, Bethany Emond Storm, and April Prusia visited Story City Locker in Story City, Iowa, to learn more about job satisfaction and employee retention in the meat processing industry. Photo courtesy of Betty Anderson.

They developed a producer survey to assess feasibility and demand. More than 80 area producers raising as many as 3,700 food production animals responded, and the consensus was straightforward, "We need more meat processing options." Learning the ins and outs of the meat processing industry was not as straightforward. Prusia said there were many steps in the project and they weren't always orderly. They met with butchers, local extension agents, zoning offices, the Wisconsin Department of Agriculture, Trade, and Consumer Protection (DATCP), and the Southwest Business Development Center. During the meetings, the team learned a lot about butchering, but they also learned something else—the industry was understaffed.

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“From talking with local agencies and people involved in the butcher industry in our area, we found that the biggest gap in the system is the human capital,” said Prusia “It is hard to find and retain staff to cut meat and even more challenging to find someone to work the kill floor. During our project, three local butcher shops closed their doors.”

The team plans to work on training programs, which is one way to support existing meat processors and encourage more women to enter the field. They'd also like to develop their own women-run, cooperatively owned mobile slaughter unit. While they raise funds, they are meeting with key stakeholders to develop their vision and business plan.

“As farmers, we recognize that solving our problem of not having enough access to USDA butcher facilities would help solve the same problem for many of our local farmers,” said Prusia. “If we don't do something to change the way things are, we will lose more farmers. Thankfully we believe the DATCP and our local extension offices recognize this issue and are eager to work to solve these problems.”

While they work on their venture, Prusia says the team will continue to support and work with existing facilities.

“While they do not fill all of our hopes for our products, we recognize that they are a huge asset to our communities and it is important that we continue to work with them, not against them, as we move forward.”

Learn more about this NCR-SARE Farmer Rancher project on the SARE project reporting website at <https://projects.sare.org/FNC17-1094/> or contact the NCR-SARE office.



Three women livestock producers toured meat processing facilities like Natural Harvest's mobile slaughter facility in Spring Green, Wisconsin to better understand the meat processing business, and the physical and mental demands associated with the work. Photos courtesy of April Prusia.

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