

Direct Meat Sales: Getting Started

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Producers of livestock will find the success or failure of their business rides on being able to sell animals for a profit. This publication describes considerations and processes to begin marketing livestock in the form of meat direct to consumers, as opposed to the traditional commodity route for livestock sales. The authors, who are real-life farmers/marketers, describe successful marketing techniques beginning with the location and considerations that may drive demand, through the processing, pricing, and regulations of selling to today's eager local foods customers, all with the producer's profitability in mind. There are also resources for further study. This publication is most helpful for producers who are already raising livestock and want to improve profitability by diversifying marketing.

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Photo: Robyn Metzger, NCAT

Introduction

Locally produced meats have become very popular with consumers who value sourcing products from local farmers and ranchers, so they know where their food comes from and how it's being produced.

Producers can benefit from direct local sales as an opportunity to keep more profit and build a strong customer base. However, selling meat requires an understanding of marketing, regulations, processing, customer relations, and business management specific to your location.

A local livestock meat business is an interdependent relationship between customer, producer, and processor, and relies on understanding and cooperation from all parties. This publication discusses important factors for producers to consider

when getting started in direct sales of meat. Check with state officials for information that is relevant to your own location to build on the general knowledge provided by the authors.

Understanding Your Location

Where you live influences many of your decisions and opportunities. Customers, processors, competitors, regulations, and marketing venues are site-specific and impact your business. For example:

- Who lives in your community and what markets do they offer for your products?
 - Are there ethnic groups that prefer particular species, cuts, or specialty products?
 - Does the region have traditional foods?
 - How does the median income affect the market?
 - Is the customer base rural or urban?
 - How much local interest is there in purchasing directly from farmers?
- Where is the nearest meat processor for the species you raise?
 - Do they have USDA inspection? (This impacts your marketing options, as covered later in this publication.)
 - What do they charge?
 - What services are available? For example, do they offer smoking, curing, or production of brats or snack sticks?
 - Will they accommodate your desired schedule and product line?
 - What is the travel time and cost involved?

RELATED ATTRA PUBLICATIONS

Working With Your Meat Processor

Meat Plants: Improving Profitability in Small and Very Small Operations

Farm Branding: Selling Your Products Through Story

Tips for Marketing Sheep and Goat Products: Meat

Direct Marketing Lamb: A Pathway

Tipsheet: Organic Poultry Production for Meat and Eggs

Direct Marketing Meat with Dave and Jenny Scott (Series of four ATTRA podcasts)

What about poultry and rabbits?

Although this publication does not address poultry or rabbits, these enterprises are still relevant to many local meat producers. See the following free ATTRA publications for information about those species:

- Pastured Turkey Production
- Poultry Meat Processing: Choosing an Approach for Your Farm
- Small-Scale Poultry Processing
- Small-Scale Sustainable Rabbit Production
- Processing Poultry Meat (blog post)

SARE also has information that is relevant to poultry producers. See, for example, *21st Century Pastured Poultry: A Letterbox Farm Enterprise Guide* (<https://projects.sare.org/information-product/21st-century-pastured-poultry>).

- Who is your competition?
 - What prices are they charging?
 - How will you differentiate your products from theirs?
- Which entities do you need to consult about relevant regulations in your state?
- Where can you sell products? (Note: this depends on the availability of USDA or state-inspected processing. See the section on Processors and Table 1: Considerations of Using Different Venues).
 - Farmers market or Community Supported Agriculture (CSA)
 - Institutions, restaurants, and grocery stores
 - Farm storefront
 - Online sales with shipping
 - Direct to individuals as whole or half animals

What you can sell depends on the processing capability you can access, and the processor you need depends on what your customers want and how you want to sell the animals. Not all types of processors may be available in your location, and regulations dictate how you can sell based on what processor you

use. See the box on Types of Meat Processors for an overview.

Your location influences your options for direct-to-consumer markets, so it is important to assess all the above-mentioned factors for your area before jumping into sales. However, finding your own niche can help you build a successful business anywhere. The next section covers some key points about marketing. Marketing efforts make or break your business and will not happen by accident.

Marketing: What to Sell?

This section describes some of the questions you need to ask and decisions you need to make in figuring out a feasible product line. As you read through this publication, keep your production capacity in mind. Customer demand is the main factor in developing a direct-livestock-sales enterprise, but the business considerations in this publication are also important.

Customers

Knowing what markets exist within a community is imperative. Different cultures value certain cuts of meat over others and meat demand often revolves around a

Types of Meat Processors: Inspected and Exempt

Federal or USDA-Inspected Plants – These plants can process meat for nationwide sale.

State-inspected Plants – Only about half of the states have a State Inspection Program. State inspected plants can process any meat, but it is stamped for sale only within that state.

Custom Exempt Plants – Custom plants can process meat for individual use. Meat processed by custom plants carries the stamp “not for sale.” Meat processed by custom processors cannot be sold as individual cuts, but purchasers of a quarter, half, or whole animal may decide to use a custom plant for processing.

On-farm Slaughter (exempt from inspection) – Animals are processed by the owner for individual use (regulations vary by state).

Selling Your Story

Before considering the products you intend to sell, recognize that the first thing you will sell is your story. The ATTRA publication *Farm Branding: Selling Your Products Through Story* provides ideas and guidance in thinking about and designing your farm name, logo, and other components of your farm brand. Remember that selling your products requires connecting with your customers so they choose to buy from you instead of the store or other direct marketers.

culture's holidays and traditions, like turkey being the centerpiece of Thanksgiving or ham for Easter. Understanding ethnicities within the community may help you develop potential market items and will provide a focal point for your sales. For example, see Appendix for a list of ethnic holidays that impact lamb and goat sales. Additionally, researching the median income for your area may guide you in pinning down price points and determining what products would sell best. The availability of a large urban market may provide a larger customer base and often one that is less price-sensitive than a rural market.

Direct meat sales can be done as individual cuts, wholes and half animals, or meat bundles containing a selection of designated cuts. Additionally, the producer may elect to offer a variety of meats (beef, lamb, poultry, etc.). What do your prospective customers want? For example:

- Are special livestock diets (grass-fed, organic) desired?
- Are there stipulations regarding nitrates or nitrites in value-added products?
- Will there be any problematic allergies, such as to MSG, that you need to be aware of?

- Are there ethnic groups nearby who will be excited to find a product?
- Will there be buyers for specialty items, such as organs, lard, and bones, to generate extra profit?
- Do you need to provide customers with recipes and online resources to help generate sales of less desirable cuts, such as marrow bones, beef tongue, organs, or shanks?
- What seasonal or signature products will your customers want? For example, demand can rise for meat for grilling in the summer, and stew meat or pot roast cuts for winter.

The other factor in determining what to sell, besides consumer interests, is what farm resources are available. Selling meat means taking care of livestock at some point, so assessing time, labor, finances, feed, equipment, and livestock needs remain critical for the operation to be successful. See the Business Management section for more discussion of these important aspects of the business.

Processors

Because your meat processor is a vital business partner, finding one at a reasonable distance that can accommodate your needs and your customers' wants is a key to your success. How far will you need to drive to a USDA-inspected processor? In some states, the answer is "hours." Your alternatives are to use a state-inspected facility or a custom processor. A custom processor is useful when selling halves and wholes to customers for their family use. The packages will be stamped "Not for Sale" to differentiate and keep the meat out of the market. This meat will usually be cheaper for the customer because it's sold in bulk, and it is easier for the producer, for the same reason. The customer may need a lot of freezer space and cash, particularly in the case of a whole beef, and so not all customers are interested in this option.

Customers who want to buy individual cuts and institutions that want to sell to the public (think grocery stores, restaurants, and



Chislic is a local specialty in South Dakota. What are the special cuts your community wants? Work with your processor to provide seasonal and specialty meats. Photo: Alisha Horak, Horak Homestead LLC

schools) must have meat that is USDA-inspected. The exception is that meat processed in state-inspected facilities can be sold within that state. Some states have cooperative agreements that allow sales across state lines, but do not assume this is the case where you live. Bottom line: USDA-inspected meat can be sold anywhere, but sales from other types of processors are restricted.

Factor in the cost in both time and money of traveling to a processor with the live animal and again to pick up the meat. If the processor is nearby, that is a huge advantage for your business.

These may be some of the questions you have for the processor:

- Do you have humane handling certification?
- Do you do specialty processing, such as organic, halal, or kosher?
- What type of packaging material do you use? (vacuum sealed? paper-wrapped?)
- What is your labeling system?
- What are your fees associated with label approval?
- What are your prices?
- What value-added processes do you offer? (i.e., smoking, curing, making brats or snack sticks)



A farm label requires approval and must include all the required information. An attractive logo is a bonus and helps convey the professional quality of the premium product. Photo: Alisha Horak, Horak's Homestead LLC

- How much lead time do you need for appointments?

Meat processors have a difficult job. See the ATTRA publication *Working With Your Meat Processor* to gain understanding of their perspective and how to work effectively with

Special Concerns for Value-Added Products

Asking the processor about their options for value-added products and how they are made is important for consumer transparency. Items like beef jerky often contain nitrates or nitrites to help with the curing process. The ingredients are listed on the package for inspected items, but getting a list of seasonings used ahead of time may help the producer decide if dyes, MSG, or certain allergens should be allowed in their product. Additionally, value-added products can take longer for the processor to complete due to marinating, curing, and dividing into batches. Find out when you need to book an appointment with the processor to ensure timely supply for customers. Recognize that it may not be feasible to keep a continual supply of popular cuts, such as bacon, which often sells faster, leaving an overwhelming supply of other cuts, such as shoulder roasts.



This packaging shows off the product and allows plenty of space for the informative label. Customers will want to know the ingredients in value-added products like these meat sticks. Photo: Alisha Horak

You can produce the best lamb chops, but if no one knows they exist, you won't make a dime. Marketing your product is one of the most important aspects of your livestock operation.

your processor. The quality of processing work varies, and it is valuable to seek recommendations from local producers. When you find a good processor, do your best to be considerate and be a customer they want to keep.

Storage

In many locations, producers will need to deliver multiple animals to the processor at once and pick up a lot of meat in one trip to lower the time and fuel costs involved. However, this leads to another cost: namely, storing your product. Does your processor rent locker facilities or will you need to purchase your own freezers? Do you have adequate space (and electrical infrastructure) for this purpose, and can you meet state health requirements for meat storage? These questions arise as you scale up and may limit the capacity of your business. For more detailed information on calculating how much freezer space you'll need, based on the pounds of meat you can expect from a carcass, see Further Resources.

Check meat-storage freezers often and equip them with a temperature gauge and a freezer alarm to alert you at a maximum temperature. Back-up generators can be useful in case of electricity failure.

Price Point

Establishing a price point per item is essential to profitability. Processing cost, animal cost, yield, feed, labor, gasoline, and time are all things to consider when deciding how much to charge. It may be beneficial to compare other local farmers' prices, the sale barn market, and grocery stores to discover a common price range. There is a balance in staying competitive yet not undercutting your efforts in raising the product. If your product is uniquely raised (e.g., organic) or processed (e.g., Kosher, Halal), you may not have a local comparison. In that case, look online for other businesses and factor in your location, then test your prices in your community. And, as always, telling the story

of your farm and your product is crucial. ATTRA offers resources to help with meat pricing. ATTRA's publications *Direct Marketing Lamb: A Pathway* and *Hogs: Pastured and Forested Production* include more information on determining price points and other aspects of marketing meat.

Marketing: How to Sell Your Products

You can produce the best lamb chops, but if no one knows they exist, you won't make a dime. Marketing your product is one of the most important aspects of your livestock operation. You need to decide how and where you want to market your products. Your strategies can range from setting up a billboard along the fence line of your pasture facing the highway to running ads on social media. Deciding on who (and where) your likely customers are can help you determine how to reach them.

Regardless of which marketing avenue you choose, it's great to have a physical or electronic business card with you at all times, because you never know when you may meet a potential customer. Your business will need some promotional tools, including a logo, label, and business cards. Refer to ATTRA's *Farm Branding: Selling Your Products Through Story* for more about designing your brand.

Sales Venues

Consider who the target audience is for your products and how much you can do. See Table 1: Considerations of Using Different Venues, for a list of advantages and considerations of each of the options that you have in locations where USDA-inspected processing is available. Where a custom processor is available, you might think about selling half and whole animals to customers. In that situation, you sell the live animal and deliver it to the processor on the scheduled date. Your customer pays you for the live animal, gives cut instructions to the processor, pays the processor their fee, and

Table 1: Considerations of Using Different Venues. Source: Compiled by Alisha Horak, NCAT

VENUE	ADVANTAGES	CONSIDERATIONS
<p>Farmers Market or Community Supported Agriculture (CSA)</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Set timeframe of sales to fit into your schedule • Get to meet your customers directly and develop relationships • CSA allows partnership with vegetable or fruit growers to sell an array of items as a “mixed box” of produce and meat. This may be an avenue to include some less desirable cuts. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • You must use a state-inspected or federally inspected processing facility • Farmers markets can be very time-consuming • You must know the regulations on bringing meat to the market. Regulations, fees, insurance, and license requirements vary, so be sure to check with the market director and local health department. • Some cuts of meat are likely to sell better than others. You may have to educate consumers on different cuts in order to sell all parts of the animal. • Market may only be seasonal
<p>Restaurants/ Grocery Stores</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Good advertising for your business • May purchase a large quantity • Consistent sales 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • You must use a state-inspected or federally inspected processing facility. • Restaurants and stores require a consistent, high-quality product year-round. • They probably won’t want to purchase all cuts, so you will have to have another market to sell the cuts they don’t buy. • Restaurants may purchase a half or whole for breakdown.
<p>Farm Storefront</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Direct interaction with customers • Can set your own hours of operation 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Will need to staff • If self serve, consider how you will accept payment • Building costs/rent • Need to maintain freezer logs • Building inspections • Check your state regulations
<p>Online/Shipping</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Wide opportunity for customer reach 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Shipping costs • What company will ship frozen meats and how fast? • Need website capability for purchasing

picks up the meat. The producer may choose to handle parts of the work to make it more convenient for the customer, and, in that case, they charge enough to cover those tasks. This may allow the customer to purchase local meat in bulk for a more attractive price and enable the producer to forgo any storage or inventory costs.

FACE-TO-FACE: FARMERS MARKET

Farmers markets allow you to sell your product while engaging with your customer base, which strengthens their trust in your product. Customers can meet you, ask about your practices, ask for advice on how to prepare your product, and develop a

relationship with you. Be sure to know your product, practices, and the industry thoroughly. Being knowledgeable and able to answer customers' questions gives them confidence in buying your product. Customers like knowing they are playing a role in supporting local agriculture and possibly helping address issues such as climate change or soil health. Farmers markets are a serious time commitment, and your budget must account for marketing and labor of attending the markets. Markets often require at least a half-day commitment, and they typically charge a fee for you to set up a booth.



A farmers market with great traffic that is close to your farm will help you meet customers. It will also be very time-consuming. Photo: Robyn Metzger, NCAT

Connecting with Your Customer

Know your product and how to prepare it! I recently had a customer reach out asking my favorite ways to prepare pork chops. She said she normally just grills them but wanted to learn different ways to prepare them. Personally, I enjoy cooking, and I like to cook many cuisines from around the world. That being said, and not knowing this customer's interests, I sent them a few recipes with different styles of cooking. I sent them Japanese tonkatsu panko crusted chops, fried breaded Polish pork chops (Kotlet Schabowy), and Vietnamese lemongrass grilled chops. I also gave some recommendations on accompanying sides for the chops. I felt these recipes allowed them to try a new take on pork chops but were easy enough to follow to not be intimidated. The following week, they reached out again saying they loved the Vietnamese Lemongrass chops and wanted to buy more pork chops to try the other recipes. There are so many delicious ways to prepare the product we produce, but customers might not buy a cut because they do not know how to prepare it. With some approachable recommendations, we can build confidence in our consumers to buy different cuts they normally may ignore.

—Tim Puczowskyj, Sunning Dog Livestock, LLC

ONLINE PRESENCE: SOCIAL MEDIA AND WEBSITE

Today the Internet is woven into the fabric of our communities, and social media is more and more necessary in your marketing strategy. It's a relatively easy and cost-effective way to reach a large audience. Social media marketing can also be an effective way to really curate the story of your operation. Social media and websites can be thought of as your online business card, but with more detail. Well-done photos and videos, along with written captions, help your audience get a fully immersed experience in your operation and understand what they are supporting. Social media requires consistency, though. With the way algorithms work, you need to stay on top of posting regularly. If your posts are not showing up in users' feeds, they will likely forget about you. Another option is to pay for a website, which allows the option of online sales; however, being tech savvy is necessary. It can also be costly: paying someone to create a website can cost thousands of dollars and may require annual maintenance fees.

EMAIL NEWSLETTERS

However you interact with customers, it's a great habit to collect their email addresses.

This allows you to create an email newsletter to communicate your story and your product list on a regular basis, driving more sales, more customer loyalty, and a larger base, if your customers share with their friends and family. This can be an excellent use of time and frees you from the algorithm problem.

SELLING TO INSTITUTIONS: SCHOOLS, RESTAURANTS, WHOLESALE

One way to unload larger quantities of product is wholesaling meat to institutions (supermarkets, schools, hospitals, food banks, and prisons). Few beginning farmers choose to sell to institutions until they understand their operational inputs and outputs. Although this sales venue may provide a reliable market and allow for diversification, some producers have found it hard to meet institutional demands due to seasonality, packaging or food safety requirements, and lower prices (bulk discounts or contractual prices) compared to selling direct-to-consumer. Accessing this market is challenging, but it does have the benefit of building local relationships and getting the product into the hands of consumers without making a large marketing effort. To learn more about selling to institutions, consult ATTRA's *Tips for Selling to Institutional Markets*.



Selling a whole lamb to a restaurant is relatively easy and allows the chef to be creative in preparing various dishes. Your farm name on the menu will boost visibility and may result in new opportunities for sales. Here, two employees carry a chilled lamb into the kitchen, where the chef will break it down into the desired cuts. Selling to the restaurant market requires USDA or state processing.

Photos: Robyn Metzger, NCAT

Add value to your products by sharing your story and giving your customer a reason to buy from you. Excellent customer service also helps grow your customer base. Understanding your customer's needs is vital!

Telling Your Story

Telling your story helps develop brand loyalty, and having a unique product consumers cannot get anywhere else will help drive sales. For instance, you may develop a special flavor of brat or ready-to-eat cold-cut. You may also be selling lamb where none is available in the local grocery store or marketing a heritage breed of pork. Add value to your products by sharing your story and giving your customer a reason to buy from you. Excellent customer service also helps grow your customer base. Understanding your customer's needs is vital!

Whichever marketing strategy or combination you decide to use, *telling your story is a must*. This will help set you apart from other producers and from the grocery store and encourage customers to buy from you. Your story can include the history of the land, management practices, your personal story and connection to your operation, history of the breed of livestock you raise, or the inspiration that keeps you motivated to be in agriculture. Your story can also highlight the transparency of your business. Consumers like to understand how their food is being produced and appreciate honesty. When customers understand your process and story, they are more willing to spend a little extra to support local family farms. Your product is much different than meat available at the grocery store, and telling your story helps identify a trustworthy source of food. Word of mouth is still a traditional way to build a reputation amongst consumers.

When you've decided the avenues of marketing that you will explore, expect to do some education, which is part of the story-building process. Consumers will ask questions about your product, including feeding and vaccination protocols. Customers may have concerns about allergens and ingredients in products—especially seasonings of value-added products—so knowing exactly what is in the product is important. Additionally, as prices

change and new product developments occur, communication and transparency are crucial for answering “why.”

Fortunately, there are several resources available to help with nutritional facts and recipes for meat. See the Further Resources section at the end of this publication. Providing those materials at your booth or linked online gives customers inspiration for great meals they can prepare with your meats. Offering samples can also be a great way to entice customers and get feedback on products. If you do so, be sure to comply with food safety regulations that apply to sampling practices.

Regulations for Selling Meat

Your location influences what entities will be involved in regulating your meat sales. For example, you may need to comply with regulations set by the state, county, or city Department of Health, the Department of Agriculture, the State Animal Industry Board, or some other entity. Each state has different names, agencies, and procedures, and we cannot address them all in this publication.

To find out who *you* need to contact, you may call your local Extension Service or visit the website of the Niche Meat Processors Assistance Network (NMPAN) (nichemeatprocessing.org) and find the contact person for your state. Checking with another person in your area who sells meat is probably the fastest way to glean information. You will want to know about labeling, storing meat, regulations at a farmers market (if you are going to sell there), sales tax, and more. See the section on Business Management for more detail.

No matter what product you raise or where you sell it, you must follow applicable regulations. Checking out state cottage food laws, visiting the animal industry board, your local Extension Service, and the department of health are good starting points for figuring out the requirements.

Inquire about the following considerations, as relevant to your plans:

- State and city sales taxes
- Livestock checkoff payments
- Storage requirements (e.g., temperature control, freezer logs)
- Labeling requirements (see accompanying text box)
- Regulations for serving food (samples, meals)
- Liability insurance
- Any additional licenses (e.g., meat handler's)
- Farmers market rules
- State versus USDA inspections

When you are selling meat, there may be many agencies involved with different regulations based on the product sold or avenue of sale. Ultimately, the sales venue and scale of your product sales determine what regulations apply. For example, if you are selling meat across state lines, USDA inspection is necessary. Because state laws vary, it is important to investigate what regulations apply to your situation, so that you can prevent a liability issue by selling products legally.

Business Management

As you begin a new way of marketing livestock, there are many problems that may come up. This section addresses important aspects of managing your direct-marketing business, including tracking costs and returns, figuring out which sales venues and methods are most effective, and handling the physical and mental work.

Source of Livestock

As the scale of your business increases, you may need to re-think how you acquire animals. Should you raise them yourself, as in a farrow-to-finish hog business? Or is it a better use of your resources to purchase weaned animals (referred to as “feeders” in the accompanying table) and raise them from that point? Finally, as demand for products grows, perhaps you will want to save time by sourcing animals that are ready to process (“finished”), or nearly so, to fill the orders quickly and manage supply/demand problems. Each of these possibilities has advantages and special considerations, as listed in Table 2.



Labeling

ATTRA's *Direct Marketing Lamb: A Pathway*, by Dave Scott, has an excellent section on labeling meat. The entire publication provides practical, informative, and relevant information for all livestock producers, regardless of what kind of meat you plan to sell.

This label lets the producer trace meat to a particular animal and shows the packaging date. It enables traceability, inventory management, and quality control. Photo: Tim Puczowskyj, Sunning Dog Livestock, LLC



Lively, healthy livestock are the beginning of the business. Should you raise your own or buy stock from another farmer? Consider feed costs, labor, and logistics to decide. Photo: Tim Puczowskyj, Sunning Dog Livestock, LLC

Cash Flow

If you are used to selling commercially or at a sale barn, and now you decide to finish and sell cuts into a direct market, there are several considerations:

- Do you have the feed resources (pasture and purchased feed) to finish your animals? At what cost?
- Can you afford to wait for the income from sales? Consider interest if there's an operating loan.
- When selling meat, you will incur costs for the feed and processing and for freezer storage before you receive any income from the animal. Do you have the cash to pay those costs?

Table 2: Acquiring Livestock for Meat Sales. Source: Compiled by Alisha Horak, NCAT

LIVESTOCK SOURCE	ADVANTAGES	CONSIDERATIONS
Finished Animals	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Little input for time/labor/feed, as the animal is ready for slaughter • Little risk of death loss 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Will you only buy from one seller or multiple? • May not know how animal was raised/ could lack consistency in products • Need to have processor date lined up
Feeder	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Animal is already started • Less risk of death loss • Usually can find year-round from sellers who meet your standards and story of your farm (breed, fed similarly) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Will need feed/equipment • Time and labor manageable • Unknown consistency/how it was raised • Simplifies management
Breeding Stock	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Know exactly how animal was raised (feed, vaccines, etc.) • Consistent product • Customers may value seeing the entire cycle, including baby animals • Advantage if you allow farm visits 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • High labor/time inputs of raising breeding stock and babies • Potential for death loss • Need to time breeding to match demand • Cash flow or operating loan may be required if switching from live animal sales to direct-to-consumer • Need space and infrastructure to keep separate groups of animals and separate feeds for each class of livestock • Management is most complicated with this system

- When you sell live animals at a sale barn, your check for the whole animal is in your hands within a week or so. When you sell meat, your income comes in more slowly and gradually as you find customers. How will you handle this delay?
- Check with your state to find out when sales taxes are due. Do you have a plan for paying those taxes? A calendar reminder on your phone or some other system to help you keep up with this will save you late fees. You may also incur city sales taxes. Be aware of where and when to pay to avoid penalties.
- Farmers markets have fees. Consider what other fees and up-front costs you need to pay. Be sure you have a plan that does not rely on credit cards!
- How will you keep sales flowing during the off-season? For example, can you sell some whole and half animals or other products to build up cash to pay processing fees for your upcoming farmers market inventory? Can you find a year-round market to keep moving products? Could sales of bundles or a meat CSA help with cash flow?
- Can you sell smaller animals with a shorter production cycle, such as poultry, to assist with cash flow and balance income and expenses?
- Can you spread out availability of finished animals to maintain steadier inventory?



Grazing livestock are seasonal—these pigs will all be ready to process at the same time. What is your plan for handling processing and storage of quantities of meat?
Photo: Tim Puczowskyj, Sunning Dog Livestock, LLC

These are just a few of the questions that may be relevant to your situation. Carefully consider these points as you begin your business and try to grow at a slow enough pace to keep your business in the black. Consulting an accountant and a tax professional familiar with agriculture will likely be a worthwhile investment.

Recordkeeping for Profitability

To have a successful operation, it must be profitable, but how do you know if you're making money? Recordkeeping for the following information is a crucial part of managing your direct-sales business:

- Production costs
- Processing costs
- Transportation costs (related to any part of the business)
- Marketing costs
- Sales
- Sales trends, including which venues are best
- Pricing adjustments
- Product traceability, and
- Inventory tracking, to name a few.

Being organized and detailed is most important when keeping and reviewing records. It helps to be diligent about recording entries, rather than hoping for “more time later.”

Recordkeeping to Track Customers and Inventory

Regulations in your state may require you to keep sales records, which are important in case of a product recall. Typically, you must record the lot number, processing date, and animal ID, as well as contact information for the person or company who purchased the product.

This can be recorded in a few different ways. If you are invoicing your customers, you can include the relevant product information in the invoice and then save copies in an organized manner. This is a convenient and efficient way to create records. You can

Keeping an organized record of what cuts are selling, and where, is helpful in planning for the next batch of animals to be processed. If you have products in multiple retail locations, it is important to keep track of the different cuts you have at each location.

accomplish two tasks at once. Often, you include the customer’s information in the invoice, so why not include the lot number and animal ID as well?

Another method is to create a spreadsheet. Although this adds another step to your selling process, it is a simple method if you are not invoicing or do not have invoicing applications. You can create a spreadsheet with a column for each data point needed:

- Date Purchased
- Customer Name
- Phone Number
- Lot Number
- Processing Date
- Animal ID
- Cut of Meat

Tracking your customer sales information also goes hand-in-hand with inventory and sales-trend tracking. Keeping an organized record of what cuts are selling, and where, is helpful in planning for the next batch of animals to be processed. If you have products in multiple retail locations, it is important to keep track of the different cuts you have at each location. You then can analyze the data to see if certain cuts sell better at different locations, if there is a seasonal effect on demand, or when to restock the shelves. Lastly, using this data can help shape your stock head count and help you plan when you need to bring animals to the processor.

Recordkeeping for Tax Purposes

Tracking your sales and your costs helps you analyze your profitability, your business management strategies, and how well you manage your livestock, and it provides a snapshot of your overall business success. Keeping records of your sales and costs is also vitally important to filing your taxes. A

tax accountant will need these documents in an organized system, which means a faster, more efficient filing process.

Well organized and labeled files are a great way to keep your physical receipts in order. Have each sleeve labeled by month and year. Place your receipts numerically in their proper location throughout the year. When filing time comes, you have all your receipts in one protected location ready to be used. It is not uncommon to see producers crumpling up receipts and shoving them in the glove box. Keeping them in a disorganized manner will lead to damaged, unreadable receipts or even loss. A little time and discipline can go a long way to making document retrieval more efficient. When paired with receipts, an Excel spreadsheet can track costs to analyze cash flow and profit. Excel can take some time to master, but being familiar with the basic functions can be enough to help you manage your business. You can categorize purchases and sales, calculate cash flow and expenses, and record custom information.

The most helpful tools producers can use are software and apps such as QuickBooks. These tools allow you to do a combination of invoicing, inventory, and receipt and expense management, and they can function as a point-of-sale interface. This kind of software often requires a subscription, so you will need to determine if your business is at a scale that justifies the convenience and the cost of these tools.

When making sales, you will need to determine if you will accept cash only or also credit and debit cards. Being able to accept credit and debit cards can increase the likelihood of sales and is essential for online sales. It is becoming more common to not have cash on hand. Giving customers multiple options can make your product more accessible. Also, electronic payments save you a trip to the bank to make a deposit, as well as offering some security.

The downside to credit and debit cards is that they often require a service fee per transaction. Will you add that service fee to card sales only or spread that fee amongst your product cost? Being able to accept

	A	B	C	D	E	F	G
1	Date	Name	Phone#	Lot	Processing Date	Animal ID	Cut
2							
3							

Spreadsheet example. Source: NCAT

these payment types will also require a Point of Sale (POS). A POS is a device or location where sales occur and is a combination of hardware and software. It accepts various payment methods and tracks the details of each sale, including items purchased, quantities, and prices. Additionally, it can help manage inventory and sales tax and can produce sales performance reports. These services require a subscription, but some accounting packages incorporate them into their software.

These POS devices are useful for accepting credit card payments, tracking customer information, storing and sending/printing receipts, and tracking inventory. Users can easily swipe credit cards and, if you choose, save credit card information for fast transactions in the future. Each sale is recorded for traceability, providing a simple reference of your sales history.

Keys to Success

As you begin the journey of selling meat, *find a mentor* who has been successful selling meat and learn from their mistakes. *Keep your costs low* as you get started, in order to stay profitable. This includes watching for recurring fees from websites, POS system fees, insurance, processor fees, and livestock feed and equipment. Try to use what you have on hand without investing too much in infrastructure until you have a feel for how sales will go. Additionally, *start small* with a few animals and allow time to learn and grow. For example, you'll need a plan for cuts that don't sell well, or in case your packaging seals fail. You'll need to determine the shelf

life of your products so you'll know when you will pull an item from the shelf. Ultimately, you'll need to *know your product* through experimentation. This will help make sales easier because customers will appreciate your first-hand knowledge, and you'll have more confidence in your product.

Conclusion

To reach customers, you will need to differentiate your product by telling the story of your farm and showing why they should buy from you. After that, it is essential to provide quality and consistency in products to get repeat customers and increased sales from word-of-mouth recommendations. Producers should expect to educate consumers on how the product is raised and what they can do with their purchase. Marketing products to the target audience can be challenging if you are in a rural location, or if you choose to forgo technological resources such as social media. Whatever your marketing philosophy is, you'll need to find a way to get your story out to the public.

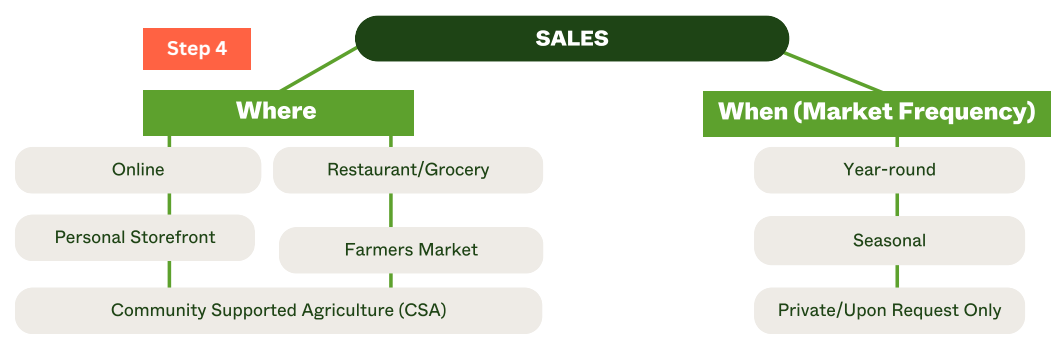
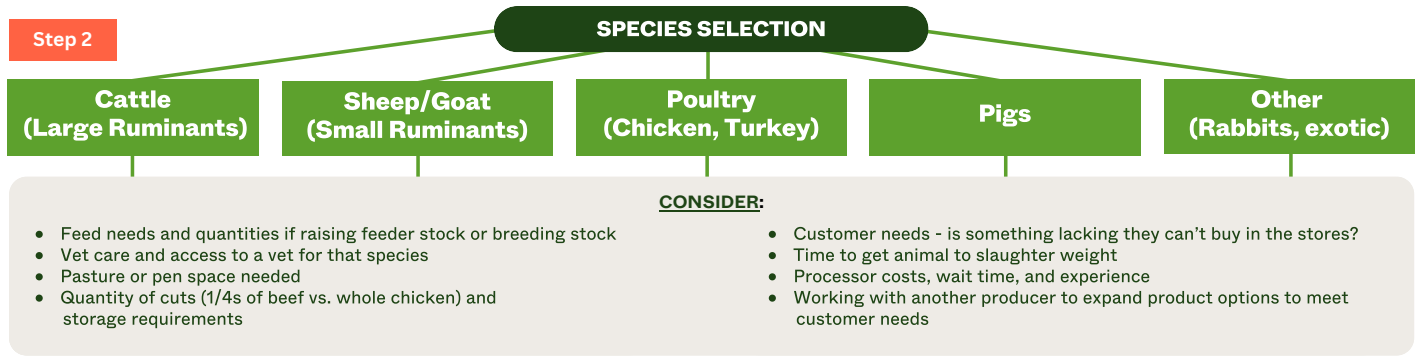
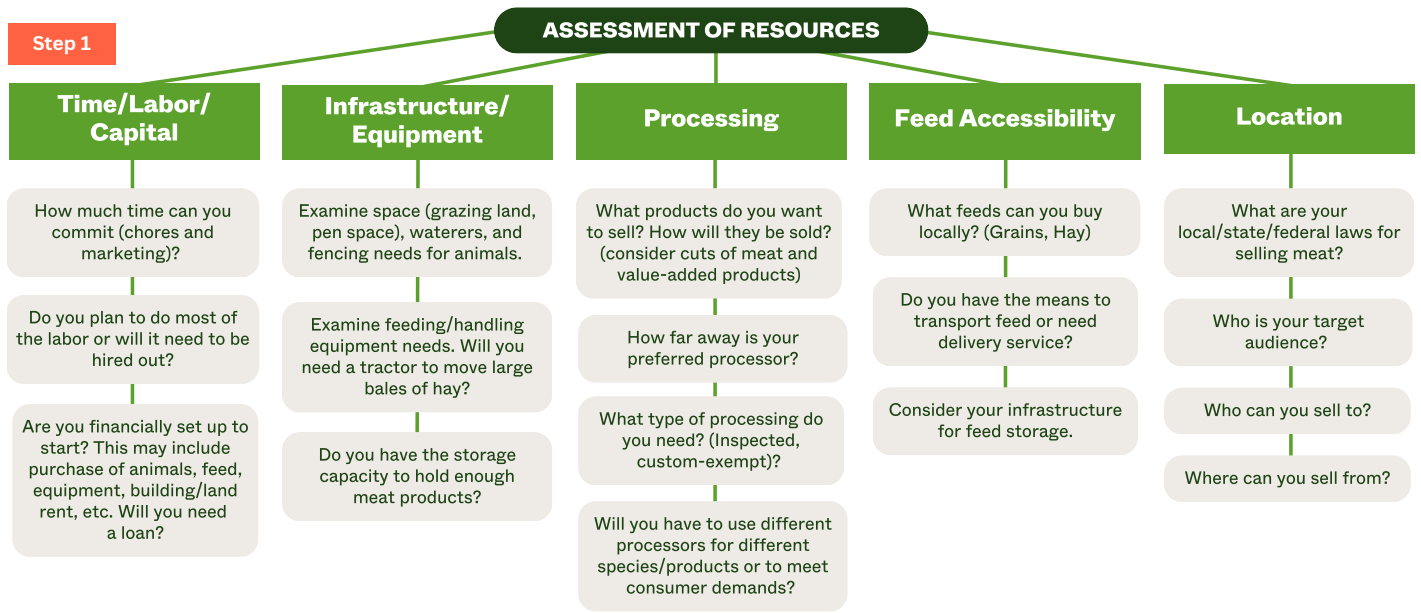
Marketing meat products can be labor- and management-intensive; from raising the livestock to getting the product in the customer's hand, but the profit margin can be worth it for small producers competing with commodity pricing. At the end of the day, the producer is filling a need or niche for customers in the area. Your location will strongly influence what is feasible for your business, because it determines customer base, processor availability, competitors, regulations, and business management.

Give Yourself Time to Learn Your Business

“Starting small is okay! It allows you to grasp the ropes and build meaningful customer relationships while you grow your business. Expect that it may take a couple years to get consistency in sales while you build that customer base. No matter which venue you choose to sell your products, it's important to know your limits (mental, physical, time) as you scale up, because a small business does a lot behind the scenes (phone calls, emails, maintaining social media or website, fulfilling orders) as you wear many ‘hats.’ Also recognize that livestock do not operate on a nine-to-five schedule and need continuous care. Ultimately, honesty and integrity can go a long way in gaining respect from your customers.”

- Alisha Horak, Horak Homestead, LLC

Direct Marketing Meat Decision Tree. Source: Compiled by Alisha Horak, NCAT



Further Resources

Books

The Farmer's Office: Tools, Templates, and Skills for Starting, Managing, and Growing a Successful Farm Business, Second Edition. Julia Shanks. 2024. New Society Publishers, Gabriola Island, BC VOR 1X0, Canada. 250-247-9737. newsociety.com

This book is not about direct marketing meat, but the skills, practices, and knowledge gained by reading and implementing the teachings in this work will help you succeed in important aspects of running the business. The author is a farmer and understands some of the complexities you face in your business, and this book is up-to-the-minute in available tools. To set up your systems, assess your profitability, figure out where and how to improve financially, it's well worth the time to study this book.

Grass-fed Cattle: How to Produce and Market Natural Beef. Julius Ruechel. 2006. Storey Publishing, North Adams, MA.

This comprehensive, interesting book delves into many aspects of producing and marketing beef that are also relevant to other producers, especially sheep and goat producers. Starting with the fundamentals, it has a large section on infrastructure and management, and another on business planning and marketing, and finally a section to help you write your own business plan. It does NOT address Internet marketing or modern tools for recordkeeping and marketing, but it is very worthwhile to help you understand in a holistic way what the challenges and opportunities may be.

How to Direct Market Your Beef. Jan Holder. 2005. SARE Outreach. sare.org/resources/how-to-direct-market-your-beef

How to Direct Market Your Beef portrays how one couple used the family ranch to launch a profitable, grass-based beef operation focused on direct-market sales. From slaughtering to packaging, through labeling and advertising, Jan and Will Holder transform their real-life experiences into a compelling narrative rich with practical tips.

The New Livestock Farmer: The Business of Raising and Selling Ethical Meat. Rebecca Thistlethwaite and Jim Dunlop. 2015. Chelsea Green Publishing, White River Junction, VT. 802-295-6300. chelseagreen.com

Whatever species of livestock you are raising and however you would like to market your meat, this book will be a helpful guide. The authors have done it themselves for years and have filled the book with practical information that you may not have

thought of. There are chapters about producing poultry, sheep and goats, pigs, cattle, and exotics, including rabbits, bison, elk, and deer. There are chapters covering regulations, sales options, slaughtering and butchering logistics, on-farm and mobile processing, packaging, labeling, and cold storage, marketing, and financial management and pricing. Other farms are profiled throughout the book, giving real-world examples and situations on every page. The appendices include detailed descriptions of cutting instructions for various species, and the authors explain the differences between cuts, so that you can be better informed and equipped to help your customers and work with your processors. It's a practical, interesting, highly useful book that will help you understand and succeed in the business.

Start Your Farm: The Authoritative Guide to Becoming a Sustainable 21st-Century Farmer.

Forrest Pritchard and Ellen Polishuk. 2018. The Experiment, LLC. New York, NY. theexperimentpublishing.com

These are enthusiastic, knowledgeable, highly experienced farmers who share the good, the bad, and the ugly in hopes that YOU will miss some of the pitfalls and succeed in building a healthy, profitable farm that offers you and your family a great quality of life. It is well-written, thoughtful, entertaining and encouraging, while also being honest and helpful. There aren't many graphics and no photos; still, give the book 20 minutes of your time and attention and you will absolutely want to read and enjoy the whole thing—and increase your chances of success as a farmer. This book covers aspects that are not often mentioned and wraps up each chapter with review questions to help you apply concepts to your own situation.

Websites

GENERAL

ATTRA Meat Processing Resources

attra.ncat.org/topics/meat-processing

Explore ATTRA's wealth of free podcasts, webinars, and publications related to direct marketing and production of meat and poultry. Call 800-346-9140 to get help in finding materials or to ask a specialist a specific question.

Food Animal Concerns Trust (FACT)

foodanimalconcernstrust.org/fact
programsforfarmers

This organization offers education for farmers and for consumers, has a directory where you can list your farm for others to find, hosts a mentoring program,

and has a small grant program, called “Fund a Farmer,” which offers support to those with pasture-based enterprises. The webinars feature information about production and marketing. Don’t miss the marketing information you can use to increase demand for your pasture-raised meat, the free webinars, and programs listed. Explore the “For Consumers” tab as well as the “Farmer Resources” one.

NC Choices – Center for Environmental Farming Systems

cefs.ncsu.edu/food-system-initiatives/nc-choices
A partnership of North Carolina State University, North Carolina Agricultural and Technical State University, and the North Carolina Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services. There are numerous helpful resources at the NC Choices website.

Niche Meat Processor Assistance Network (NMPAN)

Listserv: nichemeatprocessing.org/nmpan-listserv
Meat Producer Resources: nichemeatprocessing.org/meat-producer-resources
State contacts: nichemeatprocessing.org/state-help
Webinars: nichemeatprocessing.org/webinars_and_events

This organization is an amazing source of information for processors and for the people who need them. Look for resources to help meat producers with understanding regulations and improving marketing; there are many webinars on these topics, as well as links to other educational courses and organizations. For the relevant regulations in your location, the state contacts are an excellent starting point.

Sustainable Agriculture Research and Education (SARE) sare.org/sare-category/animal-production/meat-processing

*SARE projects are searchable, and there are undoubtedly many gems on the site. Start at this link and then explore. The book listed above, *How to Direct Market Your Beef*, is just one example.*

Western Meat School, OSU Continuing Education westernmeatschool.com

This is an online course with 20 hours of instruction. Highly recommended and a great value.

WORKING WITH CUSTOMERS AND MARKETING

Recipe booklets

Lamb

lambboard.com/recipe-booklets

Beef

beefitswhatsfordinner.com/recipes/collection

Pork

pork.org

Chicken

chickenroost.com/chicken-recipes

Courses and Webinars

Three Cow Marketing courses.3cowmarketing.com

*Free courses to help you with pricing and with reaching customers. Some courses are available for a fee, but the free ones get you started. See also Charlotte Smith’s podcast, *The Profitable Mindset*: charlotttemsmith.com/podcast*

ChopLocal

choplocaluniversity.com/blog/2025-meat-marketing-webinars

Explore this site for lots of helpful information on marketing. There is a podcast, and you can listen or read the summaries.

Food Animal Concerns Trust (FACT)

foodanimalconcernstrust.org/fact-consumer-resources

Materials to help educate your customers about the benefits of pasture-raised products.

Blogs and Publications

Marketing Lamb and Goat for Holidays.

Pennsylvania State University Cooperative Extension Service. extension.psu.edu/marketing-lamb-and-goat-for-holidays

Lamb and goat are traditional for holidays, and this creates an excellent opportunity for sheep and meat goat producers to plan their breeding seasons so that they can market their lambs or kids at the proper size for these holidays. The American Sheep Industry has worked with the Department of Agricultural Economics at Texas A&M University and Agribusiness Food and Consumer Economics Research Center to study the non-traditional lamb market in the United States, which includes ethnic consumers. These researchers estimate that “minority populations account for about 58% of the total U.S. lamb consumption and nearly three-quarters of minority lamb consumers prepare lamb at home.” The Lamb Resource Center website provides information on marketing to ethnic consumers.

Selling Meat vs. Selling Livestock: Resources for Direct-Market Ranchers

by Daniel K. Macon. June 4, 2018. University of California Cooperative Extension.

ucanr.edu/blog/ranching-sierra-foothills/article/selling-meat-vs-selling-livestock-resources-direct-market.

The author links to a comprehensive study from 2017 that features costs and returns for finishing beef cattle on grass. This points to costs you might not think of and can help you sort through your

own costs for your enterprise, regardless of species, and look closely at the economics. The author adds interesting details and further information from his own experience as a direct marketer, specifically noting the time commitments and opportunity cost for that time. Whatever your enterprise, this is worth reading.

PRICING

ATTRA's The Lambulator

attra.ncat.org/publication/the-lambulator

A cut-yield pricing calculator is an essential part of a direct-marketing lamb business. The Lambulator is designed with the small direct marketer in mind. It is easy to understand and use, even if you have no experience with Microsoft Excel. Just plug in your cut weights and prices and let it do the calculating for you. In an instant, it will calculate carcass yield percentages, individual and average net profit per lamb, and your overall gross and net profit. It will even allow you to try different pricing scenarios, should your production or marketing costs increase.

Pricing Your Meat Cuts. By Brian Moyer. Cornell University Small Farms Program

smallfarms.cornell.edu/2012/04/pricing-your-meat-cuts

Using these tools, you should be able to make a rough estimate of the amount of product you will have for sale, what your costs are, and what you will need to charge your customers to remain profitable.

See also **The Cornell Meat Price Calculator** meatsuite.com/calculator

The Lamb Cut Pricing Calculator. South Dakota State University

extension.sdstate.edu/lamb-cut-pricing-calculator

Selling lamb directly to consumers can provide a profitable market outlet for your operation. Lamb can be sold prior to processing, as whole/half carcasses, or as individual cuts, but knowing how to price lamb to customers can be a challenge. That's where this resource can help. It all starts with knowing your breakeven to make sure your costs are covered. The input costs are best estimated by using your records or estimated prices in your area. Then, you can adjust your margin or markup to achieve your desired profit. There are several resources that can serve as a starting point for pricing lamb cuts, including USDA National Monthly Grass Fed Lamb and Goat Report and Estimated National Lamb Carcass Cutout. Pricing can sometimes be trial-and-error, based on what your customers are willing to pay while still ensuring that your direct market enterprise is successful.

WORKING WITH PROCESSORS

ATTRA's Working with Your Meat Processor

attra.ncat.org/publication/working-with-your-meat-processor

Farmers who want to sell meat directly to restaurants, grocery stores, or consumers need a reliable and skilled partner: the meat processor is an essential team member and an asset to the business. This publication suggests some key ways to work effectively with a meat processor and lists resources for further information.

How Many Pounds of Meat Can We Expect From A Beef Animal? by Randy Saner and Brianna Buseman.

University of Nebraska Extension. beef.unl.edu/beefwatch/2020/how-many-pounds-meat-can-we-expect-beef-animal

Consumers who buy a live animal for custom processing are often surprised by the amount of beef they receive, the amount of freezer space needed and that they did not get back the entire live weight of the animal in retail cuts. This article discusses how to estimate how much meat you will receive when purchasing an animal to harvest.

Beef Calculator. Montana Ranchers Beef Co. <https://montanaranchersbeefco.com/beef-calculator>

This calculator will help you estimate how much meat your customer will need based on their eating and cooking habits, which can help you guide them in placing an order.

Appendix

Ethnic Marketing of Lamb and Goats for Holidays.

Source: Marketing Lamb and Goat for Holidays, Penn State, <https://extension.psu.edu/marketing-lamb-and-goat-for-holidays>

HOLIDAY	2025	2026	2027	2028	ANIMAL KIND
Eid ul Adha - Festival of Sacrifice	June 6-7	May 27-30	May 16-19	May 5	Yearling lamb/ goats, over 60lb
Islamic New Year	June 26	June 16	June 5	May 25	No Specifications; Mutton is common
Passover/Pesach	April 12-20	April 1-9	April 21-29	April 10-18	Lambs 30-55 lb; milk-fed
Western Roman Easter	April 20	April 5	March 28	April 16	Lambs 30-45lb; goats 20-40lb; Milk-fed
Orthodox Easter	April 20	April 12	May 2	April 16	Lambs 40-55lb, goats 25-50lb; milk-fed
Ramadan Month of Fasting	February 28-March 30	February 17 -March 18	February 7- March 8	January 28-February 26	Lambs 60-80lb, Goats 60 lb
Eid-al-Fitr - Ramadan Ends	March 30-31	March 19-20	March 9-10	February 26-27	Lambs 60-80lb, Goats 60 lb
Rosh Hashanah - Jewish New Year	September 22-24	September 11-13	October 1-3	September 20-September 22	Lambs 60-100lb
Mawlid al-Nabi - Birth of the Prophet	September 4	August 25	August 14	August 2- August 3	No Specifications
Thanksgiving	November 27	November 26	November 25	November 23	Finished Lambs, 110 lb or larger
Chanukkah	December 14-22	December 4-12	December 24-January 1	December 12-December 20	Young Lambs and goats; Kosher; milk-fed
Christmas	December 25	December 25	December 25	December 25	Lambs 40-60lb; goats under 50lb

Direct Meat Sales:
Getting Started

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U.S. DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE