

Niche Pork Production

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Foreword

The Midwest has been the center of United States pig production for more than a century. Pig production infrastructure is well established and has been supported through the work of land grant institutions such as Iowa State University. Historically, a mixed agricultural system dominated the landscape, characterized by many family-based farms producing surpluses of corn and other grains that were fed to livestock, particularly pigs, to increase its value.

In the 1980's and 1990's consolidation and industrialization of pig production happened quickly in the Midwest. The number of pig farms in the region fell while the number of pigs per farm rose. In response to this trend, some producers sought alternative pig production systems such as pasture farrowing or deep-bedded hoop barns to reduce fixed costs and remain financially viable. In 1998 and 1999, U.S. market pig prices fell to historic lows, encouraging many producers using alternative systems to consider niche marketing approaches.

While producers were seeking markets that better compensated them for their efforts, U.S. consumers were becoming responsive as well. Concerns for environmental stewardship, livestock care, community impacts, and human dietary issues were resulting in some consumers being willing to pay a premium for pork raised by producers who effectively addressed those issues. Consumers also wanted more assurances that antibiotics were not fed to pigs. Much of the pork that meets this description is labeled "natural." Also, as commodity pork became more lean, poor quality pork occurred more often, leading some consumers to demand better tasting pork.

Niche pork markets grew rapidly in the late 1990's and have continued to expand. There currently are at least 35 pork niche markets active in Iowa. These range from direct sales to consumers by individual farmers to organized marketing groups. Marketers consistently report more demand for pork than the existing supply of pigs raised to meet the niche market criteria can provide. They also consistently report a shortage of producers and the expectation that the niche markets will continue to grow.

The lifestyle and financial opportunities that niche market pork offers are attractive to many individuals. These individuals may have little or no experience with raising pigs. Much of the existing pig production resources are not appropriate for this audience. This handbook was written to serve as an introduction to pig production with a focus on the practical issues niche market pig producers face. While perhaps of most value to the novice, the information in this handbook also is useful to the more experienced pig producer considering niche pork production as well as the seasoned niche pork producer.

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Conclusion

Niche pork production is growing rapidly in the United States. In some markets, demand for pork exceeds supply. Opportunities for producers who are willing to raise pigs according to the specifications of a niche market exist. Meeting these guidelines can be challenging, but a growing number of producers are demonstrating the viability of this type of pig production.

Pig production is constantly changing, and niche pork is no exception. Success depends on the producers' ability to innovate and learn from their peers and neighbors. Individuals should seek opportunities to network with other producers and service suppliers such as veterinarians and nutritionists, and to interact with extension and university staff.

Niche pork production offers lifestyle and financial opportunities that are attractive to many individuals. The low capital nature of most operations makes it a good complement to other farming activities or as partial employment for someone who wants to remain connected to livestock production. Niche pork production rewards pig husbandry, attention to detail, and innovation. It is hoped that this handbook will provide useful insights to stimulate thinking by niche pork producers as well as technical information. This handbook is only a start. There is an abundance of other good information sources, some of which are listed on the following pages.

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Resource Groups

Agricultural Marketing Resource Center

<http://www.agmrc.org/agmrc/commodity/livestock/pork/productionresearcheconomicsprofit.htm>

ATTRA - National Sustainable Agriculture Information Service
P.O. Box 3657. Fayetteville, AR 72702. 1-800-346-9140.
<http://www.attra.org/>

Center for Rural Affairs
145 Main St , PO Box 136. Lyons, NE 68038. (402) 687-2100.
<http://www.cfra.org/>

Iowa Pork Industry Center. 109 Kildee Hall. Iowa State University, Ames, IA 50011-3150.
515-294-4103. in Iowa: 1-800-808-7675
<http://www.ipic.iastate.edu/about.html>

Iowa State Extension, Iowa Manure Management Action Group
<http://www.agronext.iastate.edu/immag/homepage.html>

Iowa State University, Department of Agricultural and Biosystems Engineering. disSolving
Swine Mortality Problems. <http://www3.abe.iastate.edu/PigsGone/index.htm>

Iowa Department of Natural Resources. Animal Feeding Operations.
<http://www.iowadnr.com/afo/appcert.html>

Leopold Center for Sustainable Agriculture
209 Curtiss Hall. Iowa State University, Ames, IA 50011-1050. (515) 294-3711
<http://www.leopold.iastate.edu/>

Midwest Plan Service
122 Davidson Hall. Iowa State University, Ames, IA 50011-3080.
1-800-562-3618 or 1-515-294-4337.
<http://www.mwps.org/index.cfm>

National Pork Board. Niche Pork
<http://www.nichepork.org>

Pork Niche Market Working Group
http://www.pnmwg.org/projects_reports.html

Practical Farmers of Iowa.
P.O. Box 349. Ames, IA 50010
(515) 232-5661
<http://www.practicalfarmers.org/>

U.S. Pork Information Gateway
<http://pork.porkgateway.org/web/guest/home>