

The Niche Pork Production Handbook

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Summary and Implications

Niche pork markets grew rapidly in the late 1990's and have continued to expand. There are currently 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 that meet the niche market criteria. They also consistently report a shortage of producers and the expectation that the niche markets will continue to grow.

The lifestyle and financial opportunities offered by niche pork markets 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. To address these needs, a Niche Pork Production handbook was developed in 2007. The handbook is a collection of 30 individual leaflets addressing practical issues of niche pork production. The handbook is available for download from the Iowa Pork Industry Center website:

<http://www.ipic.iastate.edu/publications.html>.

This handbook was written to serve as an introduction to pig production with a focus on the practical issues facing niche market pig producers. Although perhaps most valuable to the novice, the information in this handbook is also useful to the more experienced pig producer considering niche pork production as well as the seasoned niche pork producer.

Introduction

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 1980s and 1990s 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, US 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, US 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.

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Results and Discussion

The handbook is a collection of 30 individual leaflets addressing practical issues of niche pork production. The handbook is available for download from the Iowa Pork Industry Center website:

<http://www.ipic.iastate.edu/publications.html>. Topics addressed in the handbook include records, environment, nutrition, reproduction and genetics, production flow, pork quality, pig husbandry, managing feed costs, and managing non-feed costs.

Niche pork production is growing rapidly in the United States. In some markets, demand for pork exceeds supply. Opportunities exist for producers who are willing to raise pigs according to the specifications of a niche market. 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

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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 make 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. The Niche Pork Production Handbook provides useful insights that will encourage discussion and innovation among niche pork producers as well as technical information about raising pigs for niche markets.