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# Niman Ranch Pork and the ISU Allee Farm: A Case Study

## **Abstract**

In 1994, Paul Willis, a hog farmer from northern Iowa, was introduced to Bill Niman, a specialty food supplier in the San Francisco area. After 1 year Willis' farm was the sole source of Niman Ranch pork. Demand grew. Producers from Iowa set up a 50/50 joint venture and in 1998 created Niman Ranch Pork Company. Niman Ranch Pork now supplies meat for Niman McConnell (Oakland, CA), who distributes to hundreds of restaurants and retailers nationwide. Niman Ranch Pork (Thornton, IA) buys pigs from 210 producers in Iowa and neighboring states. A premium of \$6.00/cwt live is paid on each pig, when conventional hog prices are \$34–\$48/cwt. All pigs are identified by their farm of origin and are tracked for quality control purposes. Meat quality ratings are given to producers based on pH, color, shear force, drip loss, and taste scores.

## **Keywords**

Animal Science

## **Disciplines**

Agricultural Science | Agriculture | Animal Sciences

# Niman Ranch Pork and the ISU Allee Farm: A Case Study

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## Introduction

In 1994, Paul Willis, a hog farmer from northern Iowa, was introduced to Bill Niman, a specialty food supplier in the San Francisco area. After 1 year Willis' farm was the sole source of Niman Ranch pork. Demand grew. Producers from Iowa set up a 50/50 joint venture and in 1998 created Niman Ranch Pork Company. Niman Ranch Pork now supplies meat for Niman McConnell (Oakland, CA), who distributes to hundreds of restaurants and retailers nationwide. Niman Ranch Pork (Thornton, IA) buys pigs from 210 producers in Iowa and neighboring states. A premium of \$6.00/cwt live is paid on each pig, when conventional hog prices are \$34–\$48/cwt. All pigs are identified by their farm of origin and are tracked for quality control purposes. Meat quality ratings are given to producers based on pH, color, shear force, drip loss, and taste scores.

Niman Ranch Pork has grown 40% and now (fall 2002) slaughters approximately 1,700 pigs a week. Niman Ranch Pork follows standards set forth by the Animal Welfare Institute (AWI), Washington DC, requiring that pigs are allowed to behave naturally in outdoor or bedded settings (Table 1). Humane husbandry of the pigs and ample space are required. AWI also requires that a farm family own and provide most of the labor for the pigs. Farmers who deviate from the AWI guidelines will be withdrawn from the Niman Ranch Pork program. The approved producers sign a Quality Standard Affidavit that is filed with the USDA.

## Materials and Methods

The Allee Farm did not meet the criteria of a family farm. The Allee farm is designed as a

sustainable family-sized farm demonstration and is operated by one full-time superintendent assisted by part-time labor. Niman Ranch Pork, Paul Willis, and AWI accepted the Allee Farm as an educational and tour facility for Niman Ranch Pork. In November 2001, the Allee Farm signed the Quality Standard Affidavit. At that time, Niman Ranch Pork had 180 producers, the majority of whom were farrowing in the spring and fall, meaning a short supply of pork during the winter and summer months. Producers were needed to farrow in July and January to ensure a constant supply of hogs.

## Results and Discussion

The Allee Farm currently pasture-farrows about 40 sows in July on 15 acres of alfalfa in steel, arc-style huts. Sows are given regular vaccinations and can be treated with injectable antibiotics, if needed. Sows were farrowed indoors in December 2002. The indoor farrowing facility, a large lean-to on an existing barn, was fitted with a 150,000 BTU tube radiant heater and a variable speed exhaust fan. Modified A-frame plywood pasture-farrowing huts were arranged back-to-back in two rows. The backs were opened to create a common creep area for the pigs. Huts were removed and group lactation occurred 10 days after farrowing. At 3 weeks of age, non-medicated creep feed was provided. At 5 weeks of age, pigs were weaned, wormed, and vaccinated for *Haemophilus pleuropneumoniae*, pseudorabies, and erysipelas. After weaning, the pigs were moved to bedded hoops (30 × 72 feet) for finishing. Sixty days later the pigs were wormed and revaccinated for pseudorabies and erysipelas. The Allee Farm veterinarian regularly communicates with the Niman Ranch veterinarian. In December 2002, the first pigs from the Allee Farm were marketed to Niman Ranch Pork. These pigs were farrowed on pasture in July and fed in hoop barns. By

participating in a successful niche market, the ISU Allee Farm plans to learn about natural pork production and niche marketing, while providing a learning setting for others interested in this topic.

### Acknowledgments

We gratefully acknowledge the cooperation of Niman Ranch Pork—Paul Willis and Lori Lyons; and the Leopold Center for Sustainable Agriculture.

**Table 1. Animal Welfare Institute humane husbandry standards for pigs.**

<u>Item</u>	<u>Requirement</u>
Housing	Design allows animals to behave naturally New buildings must allow in daylight
<u>Space requirements</u>	
Finishing pigs	Dunging and lying areas kept separate Room for animal to lie in full recumbent position
Boars	64 square feet per individual
Sow and litter in pens	64 square feet per sow and litter
Sow and litter in boxes	48 square feet per sow and litter
Group lactation	81 square feet per sow and litter
Gestating sows	27 square feet per individual
Bedding	Straw or chopped corn stover/pasture or dirt yard Bedding maintained in hygienic manner
Outdoor animals	Continuous access to shelter
Family farm	Owns the hogs Depends on farm for livelihood Family provides majority of labor for operation
Equipment/buildings	Allow freedom of movement and natural behavior
Transport personnel	Prevent injury while loading and unloading
Diet	Varied and well-balanced Satiety of animal must be met Ad libitum access to water Minimum competition over feed
Injury	Individual treatments to injured pig Injured animals euthanized on farm
Weaning	Recommended 6 weeks of age Minimum 5 weeks of age
Castration	Before 2 weeks of age
Prohibited	Confinement crates Hot prod or electric shockers Subtherapeutic antibiotics, hormones, sulfas Limit feeding of gestating sows Tail docking