



LEOPOLD CENTER
FOR SUSTAINABLE AGRICULTURE

Developing an integrated research and outreach program for niche pork

Abstract The project goal was to help farmers with production challenges involved in raising niche hogs (i.e., certified organic and antibiotic-free). It focused on developing and securing funds for an integrated research and outreach program to address swine production challenges. A second strategy was to continue to provide support for the Pork Niche Market Working Group.

Question & Answer

Q: Can I make money raising niche hogs?

A: This project created an integrated niche pork research and outreach effort that will develop information on the costs of producing niche hogs, which is one crucial piece of information needed to answer this question, with the other being the price a farmer will receive for these hogs. The new production assistance project will also help farmers who now raise niche hogs lower their production costs so that they can be more profitable.

The two project objectives were to:

1. Secure involvement and support from key individuals and groups to develop, fund, and deliver an integrated research and outreach program on pork niche production
2. Facilitate the PNMWG to help bring focus to the production needs of niche pork farmers while maintaining an emphasis on the other parts of niche pork supply chains, including the processing, distribution, and market development functions.

Results and discussion

Following meetings with potential collaborators, their input was refined to create plans of work for the assistance program. A matrix was formulated to indicate key potential partners, topics to be discussed with each group, and people responsible for these discussions.

The discussions yielded the components of an integrated research and outreach program for niche pork production. The main activity areas for this program were to:

1. Use the services of local private veterinarians and the ISU Veterinary Diagnostic Laboratory to characterize typical disease pressures on antibiotic-free niche pork farms, and then develop and test prevention and intervention strategies that respect the constraints of the production protocols involved;
2. Use the services of ISU Extension livestock field specialists to acquire and analyze comprehensive

Background

The Leopold Center's Kellogg-funded Pork Niche Market Working Group (PNMWG) has helped niche pork farmers, other groups and individuals collaboratively address challenges facing producers interested in working with niche pork. This project was designed to help the PNMWG consider top priority needs related to production issues.

Meetings with potential collaborators were used to identify important aspects of a potential integrated production assistance program, including possible sources of funding. The input was refined into plans of work that were used to gain participation and funding commitments.

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Budget:
\$25,000 for year one

performance data from niche pork farms, and then develop and test management strategies to improve performance; and

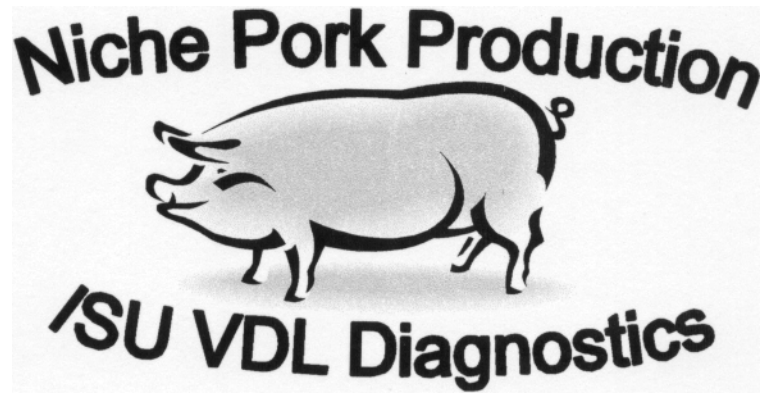
3. Disseminate the knowledge generated from the diagnostic and record-keeping components through outreach activities that target key audiences, including farmers, Extension educators, veterinarians, and agricultural lenders.

One outcome was an agreement by PNMWG to submit a project proposal on behalf of the Iowa Pork Industry Center to the USDA National Research Initiative. The following entities agreed to participate:

- Eden Natural Certified Berkshire Pork
- Iowa Farm Business Association
- Iowa Pork Industry Center
- ISU College of Agriculture
- ISU College of Veterinary Medicine
- ISU Extension
- ISU Veterinary Diagnostic and Production Animal Medicine Department
- Leopold Center for Sustainable Agriculture
- Niman Ranch Pork Company
- Organic Valley Family of Farms
- Practical Farmers of Iowa
- University of Nebraska—Lincoln Animal Science Department

The project, “Enhancing Small Farm Prosperity: An Integrated Research, Education, and Outreach Program for Niche Pork Producers,” was approved for \$400,000 of funding by the U.S. Department of Agriculture. The two-year project began in July 2005. Thus far, 74 niche pork farms in Iowa, Wisconsin, Illinois, Minnesota, Nebraska, Kansas, and South Dakota have agreed to participate. Nine Extension livestock field specialists are working with these farmers to use records as a diagnostic tool for performance improvement. In addition, 19 private practice veterinarians are collaborating with 24 different farms that are involved in the intensive diagnostic component of the project.

In work with the PNMWG, three meetings were held in 2005 and a goal for the year was to continue to develop, fund, and conduct R&D projects to address immediate



A graphic used for the niche pork production project to flag diagnostic submission forms.

needs, such as herd health practices, and production and marketing research. A second PNMWG work focus was to address two burgeoning competitive challenges facing niche pork efforts. One stems from efforts by large integrated companies to capture expanding markets with products that either appear to be similar or are similar to those from niche pork companies involved in the PNMWG. The other test comes from competition among niche pork companies involved in the PNMWG; foodservice distributors and retail chains are attempting to pressure suppliers to accept lower prices by suggesting that they can be replaced with other suppliers. A feasibility study on options for cooperation among niche pork producers was planned for early 2006.

The funds from this project were used in support of certain components of the PNMWG, which has several other sources of funding. The PNMWG will continue to operate even though this project's funding has ceased.

Impact of results

What would help niche pork farmers with their production challenges? The project sought to secure involvement and support from key individuals and groups to develop, fund, and deliver an integrated research and outreach program on niche pork production. In the process, it was learned that relationships are crucial to facilitating collaborative projects. Thus, this project was able to

succeed because it had a broad range of participants from various groups and disciplines, with these people having a deep level of commitment to the project and its participating farmers.

Education and outreach

Publications related to the project included the PNMWG newsletter, and articles in the *Des Moines Register* and the *Farm News* of Fort Dodge. Public presentations were made at the Dan Wilson farm in Paullina, the 2006 PFI annual conference in Des Moines, and the January 2006 Iowa Pork Congress in Des Moines.

Leveraged funds

Leopold Center funds were used to leverage additional research dollars. The funds were all awarded to the Iowa Pork Industry Center at Iowa State University for the integrated research and outreach program for niche pork production. Among them were:

- \$400,000 grant from USDA National Research Initiative,
- \$10,000 from W.K. Kellogg Foundation Grant for the Value Chain Partnerships for Sustainable Agriculture (VCPSA) project, and
- \$10,000 from a special USDA grant awarded to the ISU Hoop Group.

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