



## Gathering the Herd: Vermont Meat Processing Case Study

Prepared By:

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## Key Messages .....

- ▶ The Meat Processing Task Force within Farm to Plate, active from 2011 to 2013, facilitated greater mutual understanding between livestock farmers and meat processors – two constituencies that had been in minimal contact with each other and were largely unaware of each others' challenges.
- ▶ Through a combination of outreach, education, financial analysis, and the sharing of funding opportunities, the Task Force provided the private sector with market intelligence and networking opportunities as new processing facilities were being established and existing ones were expanding.
- ▶ The widely held assumption that Vermont needed more slaughterhouses was discovered by Task Force members to be flawed; stakeholders instead realized that existing slaughter facilities needed more processing space and that processors were burdened by heavy fall bookings.
- ▶ Consistent and dedicated leadership and a mandate to include everyone at the table led to efficient Task Force meetings and a shared sense of mutual purpose.
- ▶ As demand for Vermont-raised meat increases among certain market segments, the opportunity is ripe for a new task force that is focused on meat production issues – specifically, how to assist farmers who want to “scale up” and produce meat at price points that will expand Vermont producers' reach in the marketplace.



## The challenges were abundant and the frustration was audible.

Back in 2010, it was easy to travel in Vermont's livestock and meat production circles and hear complaints about what was lacking. Farmers were concerned about a perceived scarcity of local slaughterhouses. Processors—who slaughter and butcher live animals for meat—were financially challenged by a lack of business at certain times of the year. Chefs and retailers were finding insufficient and erratic consistency in local meat cuts.

You could say the herd was restless—frustration was brimming all around. Yet the various stakeholders within Vermont's meat industry were in minimal contact with each other and largely unaware of each others' challenges, making collaborative solutions impossible.

At the same time, Vermont was experiencing an uptick in consumer demand for local meat. Shoppers were clamoring for Vermont grown, humanely raised, sustainably sourced products. These consumers were likely not aware of the challenges facing Vermont meat production, but nearly everyone in Vermont meat production was aware of these consumers, and wanted to reach more of them.

So there was no choice but to get to work. In early 2011, key players in Vermont's agricultural network came together in a unique way to understand and address the bottlenecks in local meat processing—an agricultural sector largely misunderstood and overlooked. Over the course of three years, a task force embedded in ***Vermont's Farm to Plate Network*** tackled issues jointly faced by livestock farmers and processors, and supported new private sector projects while assisting ones already underway.

### **Farm to Plate Meat Processing Task Force**

Vermont Agency of Agriculture  
 Northeast Organic Farming Association of Vermont  
 Vermont Farm Viability Program (VHCB)  
 VEDA-Vermont Ag Credit Corp  
 University of Vermont Extension  
 Rural Vermont  
 Castanea Foundation  
 Vermont Meat and Poultry Processors Association  
 Vermont Sheep and Goat Association  
 Vermont Beef Producers Association  
 Vermont Grass Farmers Association

As a result, many of the state's processing facilities began operating more smoothly within a few years. New facilities opened and existing ones expanded in thoughtful ways. And eventually there was greater mutual understanding between farmers and processors—and less grumbling.



## Here's the story of how it happened—and how, ironically, the success of what happened led to the new challenges now being faced within Vermont's livestock industry.

When Chelsea Bardot Lewis arrived in Vermont in 2010, after writing a master's thesis at Tufts about New England's meat processing infrastructure, she wasn't expecting to work on meat issues in her new position at the [Vermont Agency of Agriculture](#). But soon she discovered that many people in Vermont food advocacy had begun focusing on meat production, so she devoted part of her time to it.

The common assumption back then was that there were not enough slaughterhouses in Vermont—period, end of story.

When farmers would call slaughterhouses to schedule

an appointment for the fall (the most popular time to slaughter animals), they would often be told the facility was fully booked, even if they were calling months in advance. This would throw off farmers' production schedules or force them to truck animals to ever more far-flung facilities.

Understandably, farmers began calling for more slaughterhouses. There was also a significant call from small farms for adjustments to on-farm slaughter regulations, so that more animals could be processed legally on farms.

But Chelsea Lewis, who had talked with numerous processors around New England for her master's thesis, suspected that the solution wasn't simply to increase the number of slaughterhouses in Vermont but to address misalignments in business models among producers and processors that were leading to tensions. For instance, heavy fall bookings were not only clogging the system but causing cash flow issues and affecting employee retention at facilities unable to book customers in spring and summer.



A workshop at The Royal Butcher featuring Erika Voogd, humane handling consultant.

"My very first call for my thesis research," Chelsea recalls, "was to a Connecticut processor who told me, 'I don't have enough work at certain times of the year. How can I keep good employees year-round when we only have a crunch in the fall?'" I remember thinking, "Hey, this might be a little more complicated than I thought."

At the same time, Sam Fuller, the farmer services program director at [\*Northeast Organic Farming Association of Vermont\*](#) (NOFA-VT), was also concerned about the business viability of processors. In 2010 he put together a diagram of "pinch points" within Vermont meat production—areas where groups in the supply chain reported feeling challenged. What he found regarding processors was:

- ▶ They wanted to provide consistent, high-quality cuts, but it was difficult for them to find skilled meat cutters and retain them year-round.
- ▶ Many reported not having enough physical space for post-slaughter work such as cooling, cutting, and wrapping, even though they had plenty of capacity to slaughter more animals.
- ▶ Some felt that farmers weren't knowledgeable enough about butchering or the regulatory requirements of the slaughter industry, leading to unreasonable demands.

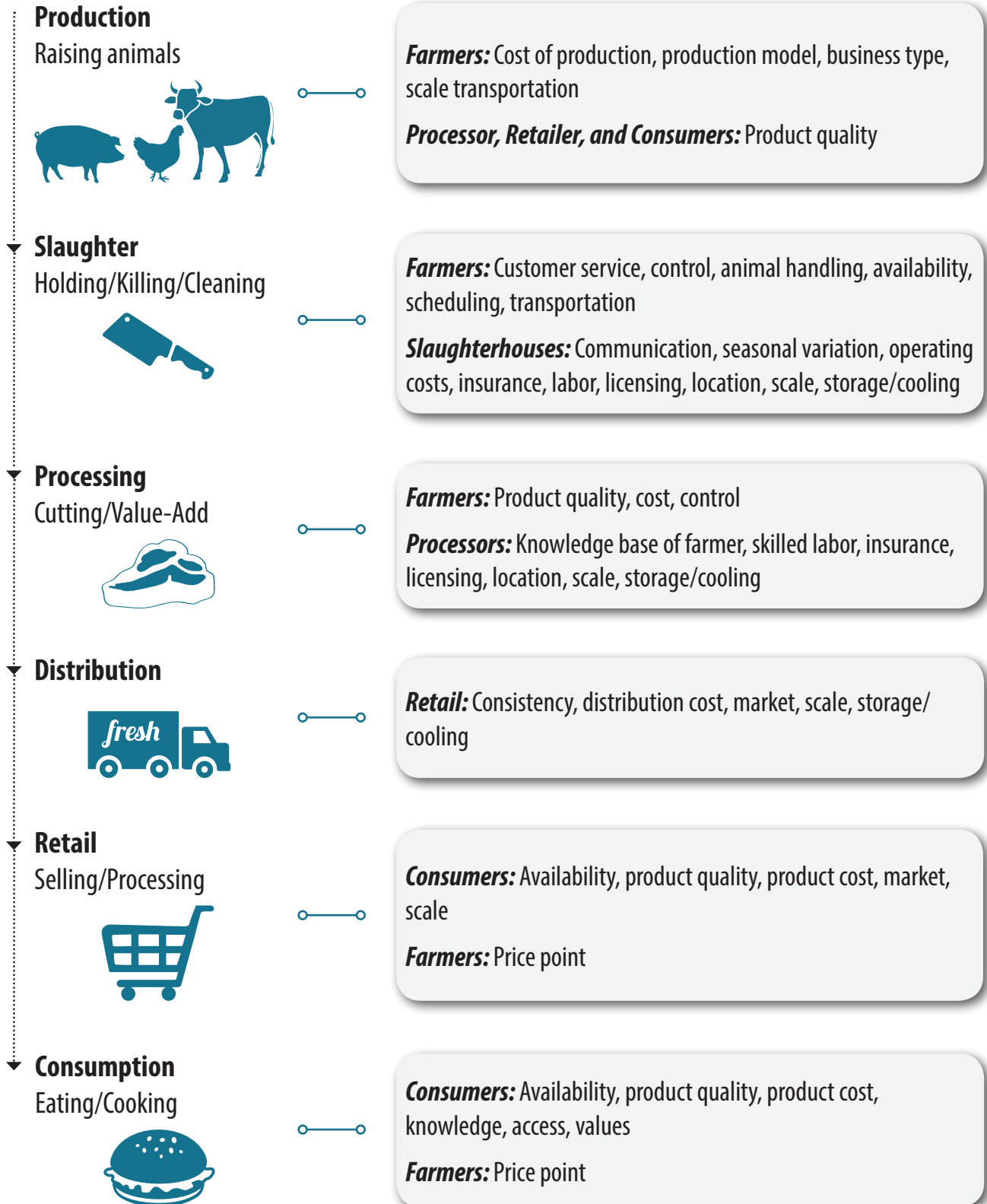
***It was becoming apparent that farmers' complaints were rooted in processors' challenges. The two sectors needed to find joint solutions to their mutual problems.***

"We realized these two groups were critical to each others' success and were running into these issues together," Sam recalls. "That's not to say there weren't many successful relationships going on, but there were a lot of challenges."

Luckily, the [\*Vermont Farm to Plate Initiative\*](#) was just taking off, having been seeded with funding by the Vermont legislature and a number of Vermont-based and regional foundations. Its mandate was to provide a comprehensive analysis of Vermont's local food economy, as well as a 10-year path to strengthening it. Farm to Plate would also offer a platform for networking and collaboration within the local food community, and would track results.

## Moving Meat from Farm to Plate: Pinch Points

### Pinch Points



The Farm to Plate team—led by executive director Ellen Kahler and former staffer Erica Campbell of the [Vermont Sustainable Jobs Fund](#), where the Network is housed—began helping local food advocates form working groups and task forces. The first of these was the [Meat Processing Task Force](#), launched in early 2011 by Chelsea Lewis and Sam Fuller. It was open to anyone providing funding support or technical assistance within the local meat industry; farmers and processors were invited, too.

“We wanted to be connected and informed,” Sam says, “so that we didn’t go down paths that seemed to have good logic to them but might not have been able to sustain themselves or get us to actual goals.”

Concurrently, Farm to Plate had asked consultant Louise Calderwood to pen a review and analysis of all stages of the meat production value chain in Vermont. It was released in July 2011 and informed Task Force members as they sought common understanding of Vermont’s meat production and processing landscape.

Initial meetings revealed it was necessary to collect baseline data on the financial health of Vermont’s slaughterhouses. So the Task Force commissioned a financial analysis of four of Vermont’s seven federally inspected, commercial, red meat processing facilities (three declined to participate). The goal was to identify common challenges within the industry and coordinate technical assistance.

“Part of the power of Farm to Plate,” says Ellen Kahler, “is this belief that food system information should be widely available, especially given all the consolidation happening in the food industry, which means more and more information is being closely held by fewer and fewer businesses. Our counterbalance to this is a taking a Network approach and encouraging collaboration for mutual advantage.”

The Meat Processing Task Force network came to understand through the financial analysis that livestock processors were highly undercapitalized, operating margins were thin, debt was significant, and skilled labor was tough to find and retain. Putting its new knowledge to work, the group helped processors receive matching grants for capital improvements and new infrastructure. Some facilities expanded as a result—the Royal Butcher in Randolph, for example, built a special processing room for sheep and goats.

The [\*\*Vermont Economic Development Authority\*\*](#) and [\*\*Vermont Housing and Conservation Board's Farm Viability Program\*\*](#)—both members of the Task Force—made concerted efforts to award grants or loans to processors. And a key recommendation in the Farm to Plate Strategic Plan—to create a skilled meat cutters' training program—was realized through the work of various partners: the Shumlin administration, at the request of Farm to Plate and the Agency of Agriculture, included \$25,000 in its 2011 Jobs Bill for such a program, which was eventually developed by Middlebury's [\*\*Hannaford Career Center\*\*](#) and [\*\*Vermont Technical College\*\*](#).



Students at Hannaford Career Center skilled meat cutters' training program.

Additionally, when the Working Lands Enterprise Initiative was launched in 2012, many of the findings that had come out of the Task Force, and the earlier Farm to Plate planning process, informed how the Working Lands board funded meat-related projects. (The [\*\*Working Lands Initiative\*\*](#) supports Vermont entrepreneurs in agriculture, forestry, and forest products by providing them with technical and financial assistance.)

"We came up with a shared way to describe what was happening in the meat industry," Chelsea says. "And there started to be more compassion for processors, because we were talking to them and inviting them to places like the Vermont Grazing and Livestock Conference and the Vermont legislature."

Processors also began joining together and meeting more regularly, with the recognition that sharing information and addressing challenges together would strengthen their own individual businesses.

Members of the Meat Processing Task Force say it was successful largely because participating organizations could assist with different projects as they saw fit. No one was responsible for participating in every project, but everyone participated in *some* project. And the Task Force



was nimble, continually adding new action items to its monthly agendas and determining who could best shepherd them through.

“In a task force, you want to engage everyone,” Sam says. “And an easy way to do that is to collectively work on an action list, so that people think, ‘I’m engaged, but I don’t have to engage in all those things.’”

Stacy Burnstein, formerly of the Castanea Foundation and a member of the Task Force, says funders and lenders who were part of the group were able to obtain clarity about what was happening in the local meat production sector. At the time, Castanea, an operating foundation, was working with Carl Cushing to expand his business, Vermont Livestock Slaughter and Processing.

“We really needed to keep up on what was going on in the industry, and we knew that all of the key people would be at the table,” Stacy recalls. “It was really helpful to go to Task Force meetings and get updates from around the state. It helped us become better informed about the landscape.”

As it addressed capital improvements and workforce issues in processing facilities, the Meat Processing Task Force also tackled the issue of seasonality. Members were grateful—and in some cases, surprised—that the perceived cause of processing-related frustrations (a lack of slaughterhouses) was different than the actual causes (a lack of cutting/cooling space and fall-heavy appointment times).

This awareness, Sam says, “kept us from throwing money or support behind unnecessary new facilities, which would have undermined the viability of current facilities and not established viable businesses in their own right.”

Turning to the issue of fall-heavy scheduling, the Task Force began encouraging farmers to consider processing their animals at “off-peak” times of the year. In 2011 and 2012, with assistance from NOFA-VT, Jenn Colby, pasture program coordinator at [UVM Extension's Center](#)



From left: Carl Cushing (Vermont Livestock Slaughter & Processing), Dan Mandich (Westminster Meats), and Nelson Lamson (Vermont Beef Producers Association) during a panel discussion about wholesale beef.

*for Sustainable Agriculture*, organized farmer-processor social gatherings so that the two constituencies could better understand each others' challenges and learn from each other.

"I'm sure the steamship round of beef had *nothing* to do with why everybody showed up," Jenn says wryly about the well-attended event at Mountain Meadows Farm in July 2011.



Italian-style butchery being taught at Cate Farm in Plainfield.

At these events, which took place largely on farms and at processing facilities, dialogue opened up between stakeholder groups that had largely distrusted each other. Concurrently, the UVM Pasture Program, Vermont Agency of Agriculture, Rural Vermont, NOFA Vermont, Vermont Beef Producers' Association, and Vermont Grass Farmers' Association put together their own educational workshops on issues as wide-ranging as humane handling, food safety, butchering, marketing, on-farm slaughter, "finishing" animals for slaughter, and legal and regulatory issues.

As it interfaced with the Vermont livestock community for these events and its other work, the Task Force, as a whole, was able to reach more people than any single member organization could have reached. Members all had pre-existing contacts and specialized knowledge within the local meat community, but not the *same* contacts or *all* the knowledge. This synchronized effort by multiple partners was a defining feature of the Task Force throughout its existence.

The outreach that took place between 2011 and 2013 had an effect. "Communication seems to be better all the way around now," Jenn says. She rarely hears complaints from farmers anymore about booking dates at slaughterhouses. And though the problem hasn't been completely resolved—fall is still a crunch time for processors—Jenn observes that more Vermont livestock farmers are shipping their animals during off-peak times or thinking about how they could in the future.

Chelsea agrees that fall bottlenecks are still a challenge, but now she hears farmers saying things like, "I know that processors aren't making money, either," or "It's really hard for them, too."



**Activity in the private sector also helped relieve some of the pressure within Vermont livestock processing during this time. Five new slaughter facilities and two new processing-only facilities opened or expanded while the Meat Processing Task Force was active, or just before or after.**

Although the Task Force wasn't directly involved in these capital projects, it was collecting relevant data, strengthening relationships within the industry, and coordinating technical assistance, all of which ultimately helped these projects either come to fruition or benefit from support in their early years. Randy Quenneville, Meat Programs Section Chief at the Vermont Agency of Agriculture, also met proactively with these private sector actors about their plans and helped them understand state and federal meat inspection regulations so that their facilities would pass inspections and succeed.

- ▶ ***Green Pasture Meats*** – a USDA inspected slaughterhouse for red meat in New Haven, with processing capacity (launched in 2014)
- ▶ ***Northeast Kingdom Processing*** – a USDA inspected slaughterhouse for red meat in Lyndonville, with processing capacity (launched in 2014)
- ▶ ***Maple Ridge Meats*** – a USDA inspected slaughterhouse for red meat in Benson, with processing capacity (launched in 2013)
- ▶ ***Maple Wind Farm*** – a USDA inspected poultry unit in Richmond that processes chickens and turkeys for Maple Wind and for other farms (launched in 2013)
- ▶ ***Vermont Packinghouse*** – a USDA inspected slaughterhouse for red meat in Springfield, with processing capacity (launched in 2013; building owned by Black River Meats)
- ▶ ***Vermont Smoke and Cure*** – a facility in Hinesburg that processes meat for its own product line and for local farmers (major expansion in 2012)

- ▶ ***Mad River Food Hub*** – a USDA licensed facility in Waitsfield offering meat processing space to small farmers and food producers, as well as cooling and storage space (launched in 2011)
- ▶ ***Westminster Meats*** – a USDA inspected slaughterhouse for red meat and poultry in Westminster Station, with processing capacity (launched in 2010)

The private sector, in launching these new businesses, was responding to a new maturity in the marketplace. For years, Vermont's livestock farms had focused on direct sales at farmers' markets. Some farms—such as Misty Knoll, the state's largest chicken purveyor—had broken into statewide grocery stores, but for the most part local meat was absent from Vermont general stores, family-owned supermarkets, food co-ops, and chain retailers.



Beef patties ready for vacuum sealing at Over the Hill, Benson, VT.

As the local food movement blossomed in the 2000s and there was more demand from consumers for Vermont meat, some farmers and agricultural businesses became interested in ramping up production through the creation or support of mid-scale farms. Such farms can more easily sell consistent products, in adequate volume, to grocery stores—or sell to an aggregator, a business that markets meat from different farms under a single label.

Black River Produce of Springfield became a new meat aggregator when it launched ***Black River Meats*** in 2013. Over the previous 38 years, Black River had built a wholesale food distribution service within Vermont and saw potential in marketing regional meat. Black River Meats began establishing contracts with regional livestock farmers to secure enough product for its new line of beef, pork, and lamb, and Sean Buchanan of Black River began seeking out new market channels.

But the company knew it needed its own slaughter and butchering facility if it wanted to provide consistent fresh products at certain price points to grocery stores. Getting a high

volume of meat processed at a half-dozen existing Vermont slaughterhouses would introduce too many variables.

So Black River bought an old Ben & Jerry's factory in North Springfield and leased it to Vermont Packinghouse, a new slaughtering and butchering entity started by ***Lorenz Meats*** in Minnesota and a former Lorenz employee, Arion Thiboumery. Black River Meats would be



Vermonters visit a prosciutto curing facility in Parma, Italy.

the primary customer in the new slaughterhouse, while the facility would also offer slaughtering and butchering services to local farmers and food companies. It opened in April 2013 and is now lauded for being a state-of-the-art facility that helps medium-sized meat producers break into larger markets (think Whole Foods and Hannaford's).

"Black River is a great example of a business that was figuring out what was possible and that connected with national and international people to get a sense of what mid-scale processing was all about," Sam says.

In fact, it was through a "learning journey" to Minnesota, put together by the Meat Processing Task Force, that Sean Buchanan connected with Lorenz and Arion Thiboumery. The manager of Lyndonville's new Northeast Kingdom Processing also went on the Minnesota trip.

There were other learning journeys that took place during the existence of the Meat Processing Task Force—trips designed to show farmers, processors, and others within Vermont's relatively small-scale livestock industry that humane minded, ecologically responsible, and financially sustainable mid-scale farming and processing could be done. Most notably, there was a trip to Italy (during which Pete Coleman of ***Vermont Salumi*** acted as translator), as well as journeys to the Carolina Meat Conference and the American Association of Meat Processors Conference.

"Bringing groups from across the supply chain together, and for a shared purpose, got them out of their typical routine," Chelsea Lewis says. "It was a key piece of what we were doing, because of the relationships formed."

In addition, producers and processors from around the region gathered at the inaugural New England Meat Conference in March 2013, and at the second one in 2014. Organized by Sam and Chelsea (and now overseen by others in the region), the conference demonstrated that farmers and processors throughout New England share similar challenges.



Attendees at a producer-processor workshop at the former Over the Hill facility, Benson.

By late 2013, it was becoming apparent that even though all the problems within meat processing hadn't been fixed, there had been significant progress made—in developing shared language, collecting data, coordinating technical assistance, and opening up communication channels.

"The group was always very intentional and serious about what it wanted to do," Jenn Colby recalls. Like others, she credits Chelsea Lewis with keeping the Task Force coordinated and focused—demonstrating that leadership is often necessary within a group that is multi-stakeholdered and collaborative.

Chelsea and Sam's spirit of "appreciative inquiry," as Jenn calls it, also filtered through the group, so that people representing very different constituencies—such as *Rural Vermont* and the Agency of Agriculture—could sit at the same table and respect, listen to, and learn from each other.

In December 2013, the Task Force was dissolved. With added infrastructure and capital investment, improved workforce training and supply chain communication and education, and adjustments made to on-farm slaughter regulations at the legislative level, the industry had moved to a different stage of development and the task force was no longer needed.

For three years, the Meat Processing Task Force and private businesses played a critical role in bringing key stakeholders together via:

- ▶ A series of workshops that leveraged processors as educators and focused on producer processor partnership

- ▶ Learning journeys that brought supply chain partners to the Midwest, Southeast, and Italy
- ▶ Technical assistance and mentorship for meat processors
- ▶ Capital investment in processing infrastructure
- ▶ The development of a skilled meat cutters training program at Hannaford Career Center and Vermont Technical College
- ▶ Exploration and implementation of scale-appropriate IT systems
- ▶ Two successful New England Meat Conferences

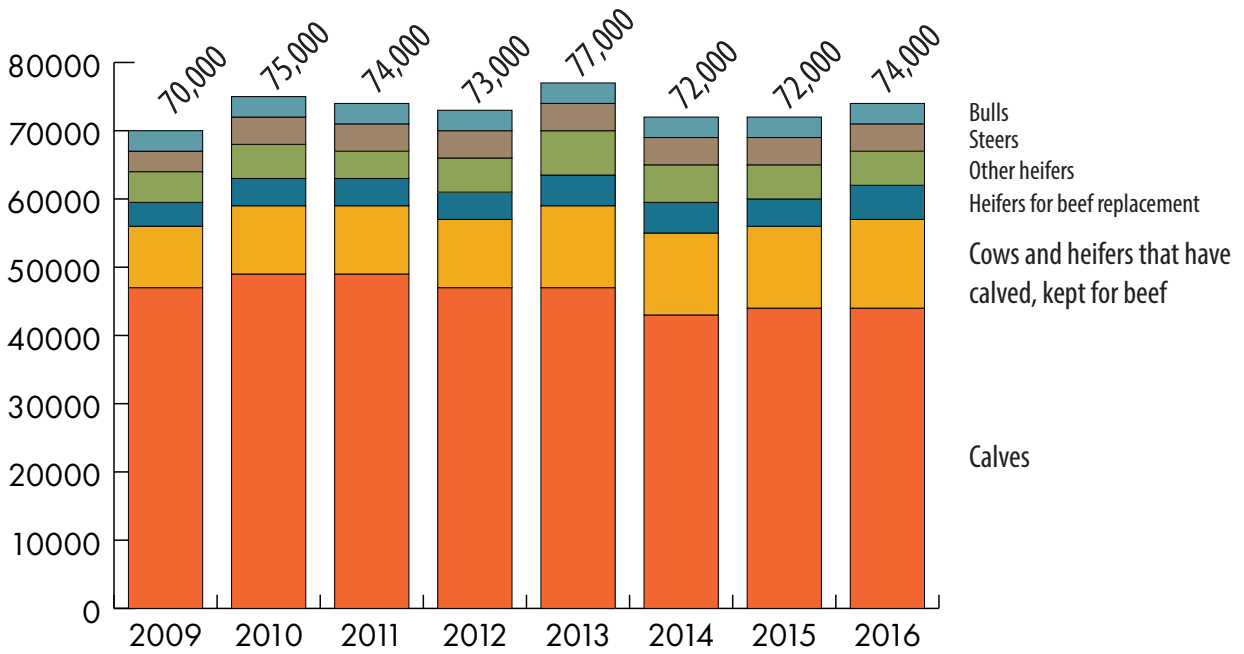


**Today, there's a new agenda—involving as much complexity as the Meat Processing Task Force initially faced. But the issues are different now, waiting to be solved through institutional leadership and stakeholder involvement.**

Whereas the obstacles to growth in the meat sector used to lie in the processing realm, people in local meat circles say the bottleneck is now in local meat *production*. Ten years ago there was low demand for Vermont meat but enough supply; today there is high demand from within certain market segments for Vermont meat raised with certain values, but not enough supply at the right price points that will ensure consumers will buy that local meat consistently.

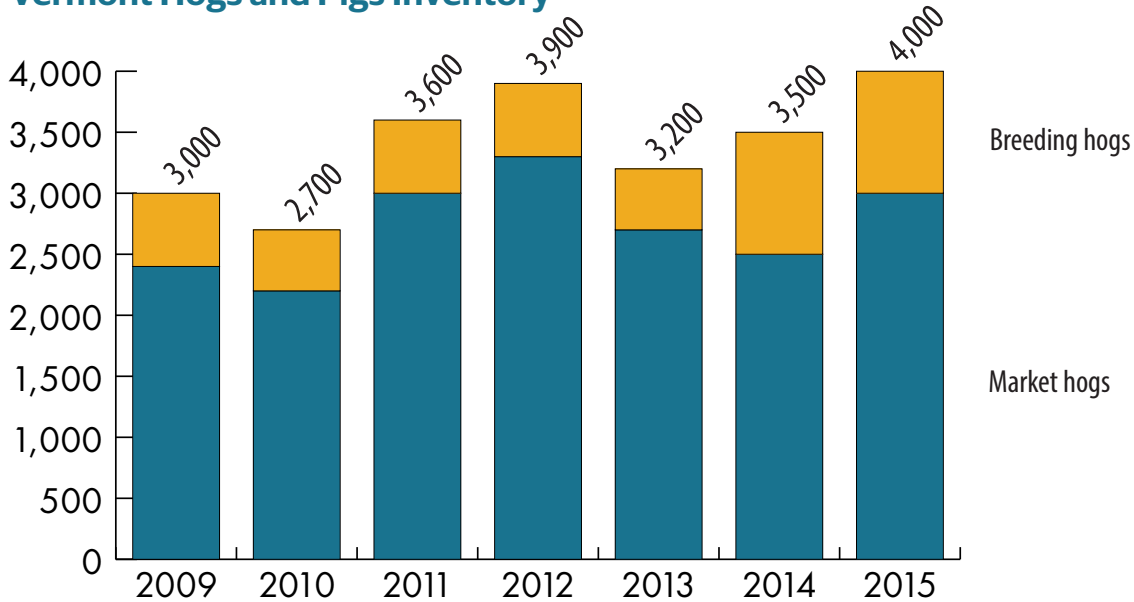
"The really interesting question," says Ellen Kahler, "for people who are trying to understand the trajectory of the market and make food available for everyone, is: When do you know when supply and demand is in balance versus out of balance? And when has the balance flipped a certain way? A key part of Farm to Plate is to pay attention to supply and demand relationships for all kinds of products and ensure that private sector actors have the information they need to respond, if they want to."

### Vermont Cattle and Calves Inventory



Source: USDA NASS, [https://www.nass.usda.gov/Statistics\\_by\\_State/New\\_England/Publications/Annual\\_Statistical\\_Bulletin/index.php](https://www.nass.usda.gov/Statistics_by_State/New_England/Publications/Annual_Statistical_Bulletin/index.php). Note: does not show cows and heifers that have calved that are kept for milk, or heifers for milk replacement.

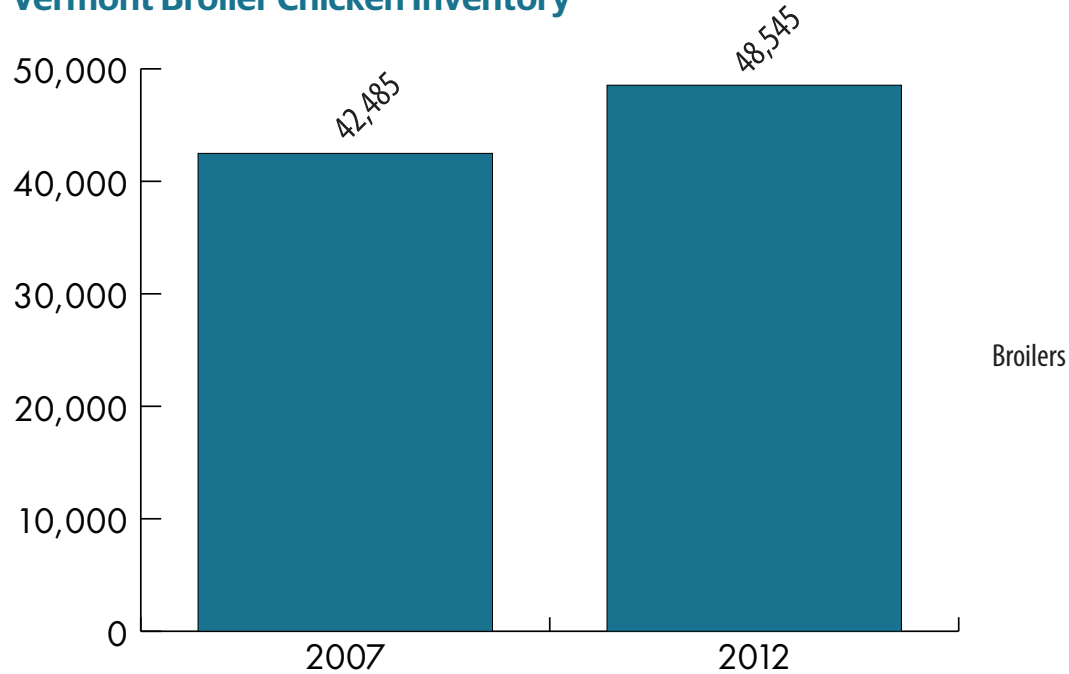
### Vermont Hogs and Pigs Inventory



Source: USDA NASS, [https://www.nass.usda.gov/Statistics\\_by\\_State/New\\_England/Publications/Annual\\_Statistical\\_Bulletin/index.php](https://www.nass.usda.gov/Statistics_by_State/New_England/Publications/Annual_Statistical_Bulletin/index.php).



## Vermont Broiler Chicken Inventory



**Source:** USDA Census of Agriculture, [https://www.agcensus.usda.gov/Publications/2012/Full\\_Report/Vol-ume\\_1\\_Chapter\\_1\\_State\\_Level/Vermont/st50\\_1\\_032\\_033.pdf](https://www.agcensus.usda.gov/Publications/2012/Full_Report/Vol-ume_1_Chapter_1_State_Level/Vermont/st50_1_032_033.pdf). **Note:** Annual commercial broiler data is not publicly available. State level data for sheep and goats was not available.

Grocery stores, restaurants, and brand aggregators seeking to meet the growing demand for local meat among certain market sectors report a need for certain carcass and cut sizes, as well as consistent volume and quality. Yet Vermont's livestock farms tend to operate on a relatively small scale, even a backyard level in some cases, and struggle to provide product in volume or consistent quality.

A challenge for the local meat industry, then, is how to provide small farms with the technical assistance needed to become mid-scale farms—assistance in areas such as animal genetics, nutrition, financing, and labor management. (In Vermont, mid-scale farms are generally considered to have gross profits of between roughly \$150,000 and \$500,000).

Granted, not all Vermont livestock farmers want to scale up—many are happy selling directly to consumers at farmers' markets or through CSA's. But profitability on these farms is often precarious, and farmers sometimes leave the business because they can't make a decent living. Scaling up—either by increasing land base, increasing production on existing land base, or selling to a meat aggregator such as Black River Meats or ***Adirondack Grazers Cooperative***—can sometimes be the answer to a more secure future, as long as the prices farmers receive for their meat are viable.

When farms become larger, however, it can be tempting to set aside cherished values. For instance, if a pastured poultry farmer wants to expand her farm, can she do so while continuing to pasture birds 100% of the time? Given that American consumers look to Vermont for certain values within farming, there is a sense within the state that it's important to retain Vermont's reputation for ethics in animal welfare and environmental impact in order to keep capturing value in the marketplace.

Yet a major challenge going forward is finding price points that shoppers in larger retail outlets will accept, but which also provide farmers with a decent wage as they seek to farm ethically and responsibly. While consumers in southern parts of New England and in New York City might be willing to pay a premium for high quality Vermont meat, Vermont-based consumers are often more price constrained.

Along with the issue of price comes the challenge of communicating to consumers why Vermont meat is of value. Farmers who talk directly with consumers at farmers' markets can explain why Vermont meat is special (and therefore worth the price), but it's tough to communicate that value in a supermarket aisle.

Given all these issues, a potential new task force within Farm to Plate could examine the following:

- ▶ **Scaling up** – *How can farmers get the financial understanding they need to scale up, as well as assistance in finding and retaining the kind of labor required on larger farms?*
- ▶ **Pricing** – *What prices can the industry charge while ensuring that farmers earn a livable wage?*
- ▶ **Carcass quality** – *Who in Vermont should be helping farmers with issues related to meat genetics, grass finishing, and carcass size?*
- ▶ **Land quality** – *What kind of land base in Vermont allows farmers to maximize growth and value curves, while protecting natural resources?*
- ▶ **Marketing and Logistics** – *How can producers foster connections with new market outlets, particularly ones out of state? How can Vermont products move efficiently through out-of-state supply chains?*

- ▶ **Collaboration** – *Should there be a statewide meat industry trade association? What is needed to take the industry to the next level, together?*

Other issues include: transition planning for processors nearing retirement age; establishing benchmarks and production metrics within the industry; and keeping more dollars in Vermont by processing more animals in-state.

A new task force could certainly learn from its 2011-2013 predecessor. The Meat Processing Task Force demonstrated the importance of focused leadership, commitment from group members, flexibility as new issues arose, and reaching out to underrepresented stakeholders.

But as Jenn Colby notes, the Meat Processing Task Force was interfacing with only about a dozen processing facilities. “Now there are more than 2,000 meat livestock farmers, each with their own business needs and goals,” she says. And she notes that those farmers are all operating at different scales, with varying skills and backgrounds, on unique tracts of land. “How do we come together to figure out ways that farms of small, medium, and large size can all fit together within our meat production system?”

Vermont’s climate and hilly topography make it ideal for grass production—and thus pastured meat production. And the existence of the state’s longstanding dairy industry means there are farmers here with the skills, equipment, knowledge, and infrastructure to possibly transfer to beef or lamb production. There are also many vegetable farmers in Vermont, some of whom might be interested in swapping plants for pasture, especially as the climate becomes more erratic.

Strengthening Vermont meat production will take a commitment among many players to forge new paths. It will also require a keen awareness of the place of Vermont’s image in the marketplace and what our values are. As Sam Fuller says, “Although we’re a small state with a limited consumer base, we’re lucky to have an agricultural identity within the larger culture and region.”

FARM TO PLATE NETWORK

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## Credits

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For more information: [www.vtfarmtoplate.com/network/meat-processing](http://www.vtfarmtoplate.com/network/meat-processing)

THE PLAN

THE NETWORK

GETTING TO 2020

THE ATLAS



**On the cover:** Meat cutter breaking down beef at Over the Hill processing facility (Jenn Colby); Master Butcher Cole Ward telling beef tales at a Vermont Grazing & Livestock Conference meat workshop (Gael DeBeamont); beef patties ready for vacuum sealing at Over the Hill (Jenn Colby); at eye level with pigs at a Sausage Man workshop in Westminster (Jenn Colby); hosts, attendees, and Royal Butcher staff at a humane handling workshop and facility walkthrough (Jenn Colby); grazing sheep (Jenn Colby).