Jill Hoover Farm

Introduction

Jill Hoover and her husband purchased approximately 24 acres near Knoxville in Knox County, Tennessee in 2009 and wanted to use the property for agricultural purposes. She decided to raise cattle and enrolled in the UT Master Beef Producer Program. Jill considered the different segments of the cattle industry that would fit her small acreage and goals for operation. She decided to purchase calves to finish on her farm and then market those animals to consumers for custom-exempt processing.

Marketing Live Animals to Consumers

Jill now has 15 acres of pasture and forage devoted to finishing steers she purchases as weaned calves from a local farm. She finished and sold six steers in 2013. The steers are all sold as live animals through private sale to customers and delivered to a USDA-inspected, custom-exempt processor.

 Farmers using this marketing method need to clearly communicate the product being sold is a live animal and not meat. Selling meat in Tennessee requires more regulatory involvement, including the need to obtain a Retail Meat Sales Permit from the Tennessee Department of Agriculture Regulatory Services*. Custom-exempt processing can only be done for the owners of the animal, and the meat is marked “not for sale.”
Selling live animals helps Jill keep things simple and reduces product-handling concerns. “We’re very specific in letting customers know that they’re buying a live animal,” she said. “We only sell the live animals, and shares of live animals, for custom processing.”

To accomplish the sale of a live animal, Jill prepares a detailed bill of sale for each customer. The bill of sale states which steer the customer is purchasing, including the animal’s eartag number, the weight of the animal and the date of purchase. It also states that Jill will deliver the animal to the processor for harvest. The customer is responsible for contacting the processor to provide processing instructions and to pay the processor directly for processing. Jill says, “I do offer to deliver the meat [from the processor to the customer] for an additional fee, but no one has taken me up on that.”

Catering to Customer Wants

Jill sells to about 12 customers annually, as most of her customers purchase half an interest in an animal. “They’re customers just like me,” said Jill, who was originally interested in raising beef for her family according to the USDA Agricultural Marketing Service’s definition of naturally raised beef.

The USDA definition of naturally raised states, “The naturally raised marketing claim standard states that livestock used for the production of meat and meat products have been raised entirely without growth promotants, antibiotics (except for ionophores used as coccidiostats for parasite control), and have never been fed animal by-products.” All her cattle are produced in accordance with those guidelines, and the cattle are mainly finished on hay and pasture with only a small amount of grain. Jill said she drives a bit further to source feed that is grown according to her and her customer’s personal preferences.

“My customers are obviously a little more affluent, where they can afford my pricing, because my pricing is at a premium,” she said. “They like the fact that we do not spray any of our pastures while the cattle are there,” she added. She uses a mixture of hot
A Whole Farm Plan, Fitting a Lifestyle

For Jill, adding value to the beef produced on her property through specific production practices and sales to individual consumers helps her maintain her property as a farm. “If you just look at the cattle portion, it’s a profitable business,” she said. “Could we live off of it [the cattle business alone without additional income] with six head? Absolutely not.” She manages for forage quality, allowing her to minimize expense for purchased grain. She does pay a part-time farm hand to provide some additional labor. He has also completed the UT Master Beef Course.

Selling live animals to consumers for custom-exempt processing allows Jill Hoover to produce a product for which customers are willing to pay a premium, in a way that avoids the regulations and the time required to retail meat. She can then focus on what she enjoys most – raising cattle on her family’s property. She thinks the market is there if she wanted to expand the number of cattle she produces, but that is not her goal. “Right now, the reasons for doing this are the enjoyment, to supply my family with beef and (supply) my customers who have been so loyal to me,” she said.

*In December 2013, the name of the TDA Regulatory Services Division was changed to the Consumer and Industry Services Division.*
Learn more about the Tennessee Value-Added Beef Program and the Center for Profitable Agriculture online at https://ag.tennessee.edu/cpa or by calling (931) 486-2777.

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