Pasture Pork: Considerations for Small & Limited Resource Livestock Producers

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Introduction

- North Carolina ranks as the second-largest hog farming state in the country.
- The majority of the hog production is located in the southeastern region of the North Carolina.
- The face of the hog farming industry has changed dramatically in recent years, and has grown dramatically in North Carolina.
Locations of Intense Hog Operators in North Carolina

Introduction

• Pasture-based animal production offer a great opportunity for small scale producers
  ? Recycle nutrients from manure for food crops
  ? Offer relatively low start up costs
  ? Access to premium markets

• Current educational program at NC A&T targets socially disadvantaged producers raising pigs on pasture in three core areas:
  ? Environmental management
  ? Farm business and management
  ? Marketing
Why focus on pasture pork?

- Livestock industry is under considerable scrutiny with regard to environmental stewardship.
- Concerns about food safety, animal welfare, and environmental management have driven the demand for niche pork products.
- Small-scale can capitalize on niche markets by emphasizing the animal and environmentally friendly aspects of their farm.
Project Objectives

- Promote communication among producers, USDA agency staff, and Extension around the environmental management of raising hogs on pasture.
- Develop farm business and management skills of producers.
- Strengthen collaboration among producers to market niche pork products.
Our Approach to Educate to Farmers in Environmental Management

- Conduct grower school sessions on conservation practices
- Select “model” farms to showcase practices that protect environmental, soil, and food quality.
- Host pasture walks to share BMP information with farmers and agency partners
- Engage farmers to participate in services and programs offered by USDA/NRCS.
Our Approach to Educate Farmers in Marketing/Business Management

- Establish an ad-hoc steering committee to determine producers’ interest in a cooperative
- Obtain technical assistance from Rural Development’s Cooperative Programs
- Establish short- and long-term organizational goals for the cooperative
- Create an infrastructure for farmers to market their product to prospective buyers & customers
- Conduct workshops/grower school sessions on the importance of keeping proper farm records
  - FACT Program
Environmental and Animal Production Challenges

- Reducing stocking rates
- Establishing a pasture rotation plan (to avoid ground cover depletion and nutrient build-up)
- Removing of hogs from wooded areas that already had excess nutrient buildup
- Fencing animals out of wetlands or low-lying areas
- Maintaining proper production records
- Formulating effective diets
- Applying for USDA programs
Demo Site #1
Demo Site #2
Demo Site #2
Marketing Challenges

- Buyer standards do not remain constant over time
- Adopting a certification program for coop farmers to follow
- Maintaining sufficient volume of high-quality hogs throughout the year
- Coordinating scheduling for coop members
- Helping farmers pursue other direct marketing methods
Positive Outcomes -- Production

- Increased knowledge on how to demonstrate a set of conservation practices for outdoor hog production
- New paddocks were developed at each “demo” site
- Use of new forages as ground cover on existing (old) paddocks
- Approximately 7 farmers have conversation plans prepared by NRCS?
  - Some have received EQIP funding this past year
- 15 growers have set up farm & herd health plans
- 20 growers received their certification in PQA (Pork Quality Assurance) & TQA (Truck Quality Assurance)
- 40 growers have established procedures to deal with animal health emergencies on the farm
- 200 farmers completed computer training
Positive Outcomes - Marketing

- Formation of the cooperative with 25 growers
  - Provide valuable information to members on regular basis
  - Been able to mobilize quickly to address different production and marketing issues
- Secured contracts with multiple buyers
  - Largest corporate buyer: Whole Foods Market Inc. (15 coop. members with contracts)
  - Several smaller buyers (e.g., Grateful Growers, Eco-Friendly Foods, Lockwood Folly Market Place, Weeping Radish, etc.)
- Local leadership within the coop has developed
- Increased income of about $950,000 (a year)
- 60-75 hogs are sold through the cooperative each week
Concluding Remarks

- There continues to be considerable interest among socially disadvantage producers, industry types and university faculty to:
  - Establish best management practices for pastured-based animal production systems and
  - Meet the market demand for pastured pork
- Communication was key to the project success
- Continued education about production and marketing options is needed