

Virginia Cattle Industry Board Update

BUILDING CAPACITY AND FOOD SECURITY: EXPANDING THE MEAT PROCESSING EDUCATION IN THE COMMONWEALTH

In 2023, Dr. David Gerrard, Professor & Director of the School of Animal Science and Jordan Wicks, Meat Lab Manager, PhD Student, both from Virginia Tech, submitted a grant application to the Virginia Cattle Industry Board (VCIB) to address the labor shortage facing small meat processors in Virginia. In his grant narrative, Dr. Gerrard addressed the many factors that contribute to the challenges facing small processors today.



“Today Virginia has 10 small meat processors of either federal, T/A or state inspected facilities that can provide inspected harvesting and processing, allowing for producers to sell their product at local markets or even across state lines. Additionally, a small number of custom processors help facilitate this critical service to local growers and communities. However, the local demand for beef coupled with the increased need from the pandemic has shown that the number of small processors is lacking. One solution is to build more processors, or expand the existing establishments, however in 2018 a small processor in Western Virginia processed nearly 300 beef (or beef equivalent) annually, and while notable, the USDA suggest that to become financially solvent a small meat processor needs to harvest and process over 450 beef (or beef equivalent) annually. However, in order to reach that level of volume, other factors must be addressed. Based on work funded by the Virginia Cattle Industry Board, we showed one of the biggest obstacles to growing the processing capacity in Virginia is the lack of skilled laborers. To this end, there is a critical need for providing meat processing knowledge and “hands-on” skillsets to individuals seeking careers, or even “second” careers in the meat/food industry. Therefore, our long-range goal is to develop a work force with a greater understanding and capacity to help small and large processors grow and thrive in the Commonwealth.”

The VCIB granted funding to develop and host an intensive beef processing short course to increase both the comprehensive knowledge and skillsets of current and future Virginia meat processing workforce.



Beginning July 27, 2023, a 3-day course entitled “Beef-Up, Efficient, Progressive, Profitable, Beef” was offered to 33 participants from across the Commonwealth. These individuals were selected from a pool of applicants, with priority going to those already serving the Virginia beef industry as either a processor or producer, followed by applicants who showed great promise to contribute to Virginia beef in the very near future. The event was held in classrooms and at the meat processing facility on the Virginia Tech Campus

The Beef Processing Short Course included classroom instruction as well as hands on fabrication opportunities. Topics included in the 3-day agenda included:

- Beef Harvesting
- Beef Fabrication
- Improving Beef Quality Attributes
- Food Safety
- Financials of Small Meat Processing
- Captive Bolt Usage and Safety
- Beef Quality, Cutability and Cutout
- Ground Beef
- Regulation and Compliance
- Facility Design, and Equipment
- Adding Value to Beef
- Custom Cutting and Merchandising



With the efforts of many Virginia Tech faculty, staff, Meat Lab alumni, and support of the VCIB, Beef-Up proved to be a great success. Brief surveys were conducted for each session at the conclusion of Beef-Up to evaluate the impact of each session. Questions were aimed at evaluating the effectiveness of instruction, level of increased knowledge and degree in which participants believed application of newly acquired knowledge would be useful in their future success serving the Virginia beef industry. The majority of those returning the surveys strongly agreed that the information and skills obtained from Beef Up will be helpful in their future success as a meat processor. Additional comments from attendees confirmed the impact of the seminar.

“All the instructors and student helpers were awesome and dynamic.”

“This was a great opportunity, and I loved every second of it. I learned a lot and look forward to coming back for more!”

“Overall, an excellent program. Very good value, very well organized, well put together with passionate and energetic presenters. The ground beef presentation could have been geared more towards smaller processors. I did appreciate the large-scale production model though .”

“This was outstanding! Very impressive group of people working together and making this event successful. Hands on aspect was great and a must. Thanks so much!”

