

Executive Summary

In Montana, and across the country, producers and consumers are beginning to see benefits (e.g., social, environmental, and economic) from local procurement efforts that link ranchers and local beef processors with schools in their community and region. These “beef to school” (B2S) efforts involve support of local beef from a variety of actors, including producers, processors, and foodservices and students at K-12 schools. The long-term goal of this project is improving Montana beef producers’ and meat processors’ viability and sustainability, while increasing the availability and consumption of local beef in Montana’s schools and communities.

This project is aimed at discerning which B2S methods are most sustainable for producers, processors, and schools. This new information will be used to improve current B2S programs and assist new communities in the adoption of B2S programs. In order to optimize local and regional B2S efforts in Montana and elsewhere, this project will:

- 1) conduct comprehensive case study research to identify the benefits, challenges, best practices, and gaps that exist for beef to school (B2S) procurement models;
- 2) identify beef supply chain issues (e.g., timing, storage, and use of cuts) that impact the spectrum of involved stakeholders, and collaboratively plan solutions;
- 3) obtain student acceptance data about B2S in comparison with commercial beef supplies;
- 4) create stakeholder-specific educational guides and promotional materials about the beef supply chain, curriculum for students, and peer-reviewed publications; and
- 5) conduct trainings to assist producers and their processing partners interested in selling to schools, and to foodservice directors interested in using local beef in school meals.

B2S efforts can increase the sustainability and viability of local and regional food systems as they have the potential to enhance community food literacy and connections to local agriculture, keep money circulating in local economies; reduce the need for transportation, packaging, and other inputs; increase access to local food; provide farmers an additional market for their beef; and possibly utilize cattle that are grass-fed, and not finished on feeds (e.g., corn, soy) that must be imported to the state. Yet, as schools and ranchers in Montana are beginning to work together to bring local beef into schools, the results have been mixed: some procurement models seem successful for all parties involved, while others have faced significant barriers in making B2S programs viable.

The tools and findings of this project will give Montana’s producers, processors, and schools the resources they need to form productive, sustainable procurement relationships. The resources will be applicable and adaptable to broader farm to institution markets as well, such as universities and hospitals. Additionally, by engaging a diverse group of producers and other stakeholders in meaningful roles throughout the process, this project will foster partnerships among producers, processors, and other stakeholders, garnering long-term interest and investment in local and regional beef markets as well as the sustainable production and marketing of other local and regional meat products.