

MONTANA BEEF TO SCHOOL FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS



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The Montana Beef to School Project (www.montana.edu/mtfarmtoschool/beeftoschool.html) has compiled a list of frequently asked questions and their answers regarding beef to school. See below for a list of questions followed by the full question and answer list.

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1. How can our school find local beef in Montana?

Finding local beef is similar to finding other local products. You can ask vendors or the market manager of a nearby farmers market, inquire with your school's current distributors and vendors about local beef products, ask other food service staff in your area including restaurants and other institutions what local sources they are using, and use local product directories. In addition, schools may seek out local stock growers associations, cattlemen/women's associations, and farm bureau constituents to locate beef producers. Find a list of local product directories at:

<http://www.montana.edu/mtfarmtoschool/resources/school-food.html#schoolfoodresources-findinglocal>

You can find local meat processors by using the following directories:

- State-Inspected Facilities Directory: <http://liv.mt.gov/Meat-Milk-Inspection/Meat-and-Poultry-Inspection>
- Federally-Inspected Facilities Directory: <http://www.fsis.usda.gov/wps/portal/fsis/topics/inspection/mpi-directory>

2. I want to sell my beef to schools; how do I get started?

A first step of selling to schools is knowing the regulations. Schools can purchase or accept donated meat that has been slaughtered and processed in an official Montana Department of Livestock-inspected (state-inspected) or a USDA-inspected (federally-inspected) facility. If meat is bought or sold across state lines, it must be processed in a federally-inspected facility. Animals slaughtered and processed in a "custom exempt" plant may not be sold; that meat is for consumption by the owner(s) of the animal, which cannot include schools. However, retail meat establishments can further process meat that was slaughtered at a state- or federally-inspected facility for sale to schools. Less than 25% of their sales can be to hotels, restaurants, and institutions, and is limited to \$76,500 of total sales. Further, custom exempt facilities have additional regulations limiting ingredients in processed products (e.g., they cannot add fillers like soy to hamburger patties).

Second, you need to know your product availability, pricing, and ability to meet the school's requirements for delivery, packaging, etc. See page 12 of the Farm to Cafeteria Manual for additional information regarding meeting institutional requirements:

https://farmtocafeteria.ncat.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/03/FTC_Manual_2018.pdf

Once you have your information ready, contact the school food service director (or head cook) and/or the superintendent to discuss their interest in purchasing local beef. Be prepared with samples, product and price sheets, and information about your ranch or processing facility. Ask questions about their requirements and desires for beef products. If you are able, offering to do cafeteria taste tests, field trips, or classroom visits, might interest the school for the educational opportunity.

3. Is it feasible for producers and processors to meet the volume demand for local beef?

In the context of Montana, cattle inventory and processing resources are adequate to serve a hypothetical scenario where local beef is served in all schools. Researchers calculated that if 1/3 of all protein served in Montana schools was supplied by local beef, then just under 1,000 head would be required to meet the demand. Montana's inspected processing plants have varying capacity for the number of head slaughtered per week, so careful coordination would be required to fulfill the scenario described above.

The case study report *Mooving Forward Together: Strategies for Montana Beef to School* (<https://www.montana.edu/mtfarmtoschool/documents/BeefToSchool/Beef%20to%20School%20Project%20Case%20Study%20Report.pdf>), highlights how different food service programs and their partners are meeting demand on the local level.

Ultimately, success in meeting demand will be based on the strength of supply chain partner relationships and communication at the local level, and attention to scheduling and coordination amongst the involved producers, processors, and food services.

4. What regulations apply for serving local beef in schools?

Schools can purchase or accept donated meat that has been slaughtered and processed in an official Montana Department of Livestock-inspected (state-inspected) or a USDA-inspected (federally-inspected) facility. If the meat is bought or sold across state lines, it must be processed in a federally-inspected facility. Animals slaughtered and processed in a "custom exempt" plant may not be sold; that meat is for consumption by the owner(s) of the animal, which cannot include schools. However, retail meat establishments can further process state- or federally-inspected product for sale to schools. Less than 25% of their sales can be to hotels, restaurants, and institutions limited to \$76,500 of their total sales. Further, custom exempt facilities have additional regulations limiting ingredients in processed products (e.g., they cannot add fillers like soy to hamburger patties).

All products offered for sale that are processed by a state- or federally-inspected meat or poultry facility, including mobile units, are legally purchasable by schools.

All those involved in transport and delivery of the product are required to ensure that the product does not become adulterated. This may mean controlling the temperature of the product so that it does not thaw or be exposed to high ambient air temperatures. Other factors such as cleanliness of the transportation vehicle may affect the product such that it may become adulterated. In some counties, this translates to using a vehicle approved by the health department with product stored in containers so as to maintain a holding temperature of 42 degrees or lower. Consult with your local county sanitarian for more specifics in your area.

For more information, contact the Meat and Poultry Inspection Bureau, Montana Department of Livestock (<http://liv.mt.gov/Meat-Milk-Inspection/Meat-and-Poultry-Inspection>) or (406) 444-5202.

5. Can schools accept donated cattle or beef? What's the next step?

Yes. Schools can accept donated meat that has been slaughtered and processed in an official Montana Department of Livestock-inspected (state-inspected) or a USDA-inspected (federally-inspected) facility. If that meat is bought or sold across state lines, it must be processed in a federal USDA-inspected facility. Animals slaughtered and processed in a "custom exempt" plant may not be sold; that meat is for consumption by the owner(s) of the animal, which cannot include schools. However, retail meat establishments can further process state- or federally-inspected product for sale to schools. Less than 25% of their sales can be to hotels, restaurants, and institutions limited to \$76,500 of their total sales. Further, custom exempt facilities have additional regulations limiting ingredients in processed products (e.g., they cannot add fillers like soy to hamburger patties).

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Clear and thorough communication is key in all procurements and donations. A school should understand the process and costs of accepting donated meat, such as:

- Is it possible to provide a tax-deductible donation receipt to the donor through the school or another supporting organization? Consider [this example from Big Timber](#).
- If a live animal is being donated, who will transport the animal to the processing facility? What is the cost? When will it occur?
- What is the total cost of processing? Is that cost being donated or is the school paying for it?
- What cuts and products will be provided to the school? The school should specify what cuts/products, quantities, and packaging is needed.
- How, when, and who will deliver the finished product to the school? Is there an extra fee for delivery?

6. Can our school use any processor in Montana to process local beef?

Schools can purchase or accept donated meat that has been slaughtered and processed in an official Montana Department of Livestock-inspected (state-inspected) or a USDA-

inspected (federally-inspected) facility. If that meat is bought or sold across state lines, it must be processed in a federal USDA-inspected facility. Animals slaughtered and processed in a “custom exempt” plant may not be sold; that meat is for consumption by the owner(s) of the animal, which cannot include schools. However, retail meat establishments can further process state- or federally-inspected product for sale to schools. Less than 25% of their sales can be to hotels, restaurants, and institutions limited to \$76,500 of their total sales. Further, custom exempt facilities have additional regulations limiting ingredients in processed products (e.g., they cannot add fillers like soy to hamburger patties).

You can find meat processors by using the following directories:

- State-Inspected Facilities Directory: <http://liv.mt.gov/Meat-Milk-Inspection/Meat-and-Poultry-Inspection>
- Federally-Inspected Facilities Directory: <http://www.fsis.usda.gov/wps/portal/fsis/topics/inspection/mpi-directory>

7. Where do I find a list of inspected processors that schools can use?

You can find meat processors by using the following directories:

- State-Inspected Facilities Directory: <http://liv.mt.gov/Meat-Milk-Inspection/Meat-and-Poultry-Inspection>
- Federally-Inspected Facilities Directory: <http://www.fsis.usda.gov/wps/portal/fsis/topics/inspection/mpi-directory>

8. What is a cow-calf operation?

A cow-calf operation is a beef cattle production system in which a rancher keeps a permanent herd of cows (adding replacements and culling older cows over time) to produce an annual crop of calves. A cow-calf operation generally calves in the late winter and sells calves in the fall. The majority of these calves end up going to commercial feedlots out of state to be fed up to finished weight on a grain-based diet, before heading to processing. The cattle in a cow-calf operation are primarily grazed on pasture with some supplemental hay. There are caveats to this type of system as some producers may retain calves longer, but the main distinction is that cow-calf operators are generally not finishing cattle that are ready for slaughter. In Montana, this beef production system is dominant in the state and produces affordable cull cows (cows retired from the breeding herd) for institutional markets (e.g., school foodservice) utilizing ground beef and roasts.

9. What is the difference between grass-fed and grain-finished beef?

Grass-fed beef is from an animal that has been fed almost exclusively grass and other types of forage (e.g., hay), from weaning to harvest. These animals are not fed grain at any point. Sometimes these animals are referred to as being grass-finished.

Grain-finished beef is from an animal that has been fed grain for the last 90-160 days prior to slaughter. Grain-finished animals can either be grass-fed or grain-fed up until

that point. Finishing a calf on grain helps it to reach a desired slaughter weight sooner. Grain finishing also promotes increased tenderness in beef.

10. What is the difference between wet-aged beef and dry-aged beef?

Wet-aging and dry-aging refer to how the meat is “aged” or treated post-harvest. Wet-aging is the process where the beef is fully processed, then vacuum-sealed in order to lock-in and retain its moisture. This allows for a much shorter aging process (less than 2 weeks), makes it easier to transport and ship, and often reduces the price. All beef is wet-aged unless specifically labelled dry-aged. Wet-aging is the dominant mode of aging beef through most national food distributors because it takes less time and none of the weight (moisture) is lost.

Dry-aging is where the beef is hung or placed on a rack to dry for several weeks in open air at temperatures just above freezing. During this time, the moisture slowly evaporates from the meat thereby sealing in and increasing the intensity of the flavor. Dry-aging is the process of choice for most Montana beef processors because these plants are mainly small establishments. Therefore, the target consumers are geographically close to individual plants, usually in the same town. Since meat is to be sold locally, butchers have no reason not to hang full carcasses until fabrication.

11. Are there any risks to using local beef?

Beef served in schools must come from a federally- or state-inspected processing facility, be delivered according to food safety protocols, and be prepared using best practices for food safety in the food service kitchen. Every step of the process has controls and expectations in place to minimize risk. These are essentially the same risk reduction protocols that would be involved in using beef from national sources. Some argue that local beef, where products and shipments will often be from a single animal, carries lower risk than conventional beef where some products are mixed from many animals of different origins.

12. I’m a foodservice director looking for delicious beef recipes to incorporate local beef into our school lunches – any suggestions?

There are many ways to incorporate local beef into your school lunches. One way is to simply substitute your local beef into any recipe that calls for conventional beef. Schools highlighted in this project use local beef for stew, taco, spaghetti sauce, hamburger, and meatball recipes.

You can also check out the case study report *Mooving Forward Together: Strategies for Montana Beef to School* to access sample recipes from schools around Montana that are involved with sourcing local beef:

<https://www.montana.edu/mtfarmtoschool/documents/BeefToSchool/Beef%20to%20School%20Project%20Case%20Study%20Report.pdf>

Additionally, reaching out and contacting the foodservice director at any school that utilizes local beef is another way to learn about the many ways to incorporate local beef into your school lunches. For more information, check out the resources provided by the Montana Beef Council: <http://www.montanabeefcouncil.org/>

13. Is there extra prep time associated with using local beef?

Not necessarily. This depends on how your foodservice currently acquires its beef (fresh versus frozen) and the arrangements that are made with the local processor for desired product (e.g., ground, cubed, or pattied).

Many processors are willing to work with schools to provide a product based on the schools needs and preferences. For example, some schools prefer frozen ground hamburger patties, while others prefer fresh. Some schools prefer bulk ground beef that they can then make burgers or meatballs themselves. For schools that utilize pre-cooked beef products there are some local substitutions available, including the pre-cooked beef-lentil crumble and pre-cooked lentil and mushroom meatballs. Check with your processor to see how you can work together to minimize any extra prep time associated with using local beef.

One of the biggest findings from our case study report *Mooving Forward Together: Strategies for Montana Beef to School*, was that schools utilizing local beef for the first time need to start small. Find a recipe that you are comfortable with that you know will not take you, and your staff, any extra time to prepare.

14. How do schools work with processors to determine the fat content of their beef?

A good portion of processing plants in Montana have fat testers in house to assure quality control. Meat plants that distribute to schools are required to be federally- or state-inspected. Inspection personnel in those establishments are required to perform random fat tests throughout the year. Most inspectors have access to testing equipment and would be willing to help plants work to meet school parameters.

15. Does local beef taste or look different?

Case study results indicate that some foodservice personnel feel that local beef is a higher quality than conventional beef, and tastes and looks better. Anecdotal feedback from our case studies indicates that on days when local beef was served in the school lunch, foodservice personnel found more students consumed the lunches and wasted less. Because local beef is typically dry-aged (see “What is the difference between wet aged beef and dry aged beef?” question #10) it contains less water content and thus produces less runoff in the cooking process. Local beef also tends to be grass-fed beef, and some individuals note a difference in flavor from the typical grain-finished beef. However, further research needs to be conducted in order to substantiate these claims.

There are other reasons to use local beef that go beyond how it tastes or looks:

- Used with other educational tie-ins, it may enhance food literacy with the students.
- It supports the local economy and keeps money within the community.
- Utilizing local vendors reduces food miles and shortens the food chain.

16. I've heard that local beef is healthier and that there is less fat/water waste. Is this true?

Local beef is not necessarily healthier if you simply look at the fat content of the beef. Beef with an 80/20 lean/fat ratio is 80/20 whether locally sourced or conventionally sourced since it simply refers to fat content. However, some foodservice personnel report that the overall quality of local beef is superior to conventional beef. For example, when cooked, some foodservice personnel noted that locally sourced beef has less fat and water waste over conventionally sourced beef. However, further research needs to be conducted in order to substantiate these claims.

17. How can I extend the local beef that I purchase?

Finding ways to extend the local beef that you purchase is a great way to help your budget stretch a bit further and increase variety. Here are a few ideas to help get you started:

- Use leftover beef in another recipe. For example, cooking a roast one day and then utilizing the leftover meat in a stew, or using leftover taco meat in chili at a later point.
- Blend lentils or mushrooms into your ground beef to make it go further. Lentils and mushrooms are versatile and inexpensive ways to increase the yield of your ground beef, reduce the cost, and enhance the flavor profile of your menu. Check out the Mushroom Council (<https://www.mushroomcouncil.com/the-blend/>) for blended ideas.

18. I've heard that you can extend ground beef by adding mushrooms or lentils to it. How do you do this?

Mushrooms and lentils are a great way to utilize local beef in recipes by increasing the yield and cutting down on cost without compromising the nutrition or flavor. Finely chopped mushrooms or cooked lentils are combined with ground beef to be used in sauces, sloppy joes, burgers or tacos. The texture change is not noticeable, flavor is enhanced, and the nutritional content improved.

For blended ideas and recipes:

- Mushroom Council: <https://www.mushroomcouncil.com/the-blend/>
- The case study report *Moossooving Forward Together: Strategies for Montana Beef to School*: <https://www.montana.edu/mtfarmtoschool/documents/BeefToSchool/Beef%20to%20School%20Project%20Case%20Study%20Report.pdf>

19. Will our school need any additional equipment to use local beef?

Your school may need additional equipment depending on your current set-up. First and foremost, you will need to have adequate storage whether it be refrigerator or freezer space.

Another example of needing additional equipment would be if your school currently receives pre-made hamburger patties. If you are not able to make arrangements with the processor to provide pre-made patties, then additional equipment such as a patty maker may need to be purchased. For schools that utilize pre-cooked beef products there are Montana-made pre-cooked beef crumbles, beef-lentil crumbles, and pre-cooked lentil and mushroom meatballs available for purchase.

Many processors are willing to work with schools to provide a product based on the schools needs and preferences. You should check with your processor to see how you can work together so that there isn't any additional equipment needed when using local beef.

20. How can I make locally sourced beef fit within my budget?

This is a common frustration expressed by foodservice personnel as local beef is often more expensive than conventional beef. Processor pricing is determined by their input costs and they often have little leeway in terms of lowering prices. That being said, there are a few strategies that you can use to make using local beef fit your budget:

- Try budgeting school meals over a semester or a year, rather than by meal, in order to balance the cost of more, and less expensive, food products.
- Instead of buying a whole cow, work with a processor to buy their less expensive cuts and products (i.e. burger) which still allows the processor to market their premium cuts (e.g., sirloin) to other markets such as restaurants.
- Seek beef donations from ranchers within your community, incentivize this by finding ways to provide donors with a tax-deductible donation receipt.
- Purchasing beef from culled animals is often an easy way to save money.
- Work with other members of your community to source and cover the cost of processing a cow.
- Utilize other locally grown products which may be less expensive (e.g., vegetables from a school garden), or pair with a lower cost menu item (e.g., USDA Foods canned fruit) to offset the cost of using local beef in a meal.
- Apply for grants to increase access to local products or purchase new kitchen equipment.
- Use a combination of local and conventional beef throughout the year.
- When using local beef, serve smaller portion sizes (e.g., smaller hamburger patties).
- Extend ground beef by using mushroom, lentil, or other ingredients.

21. Is there any way to keep a consistent price point for local beef?

The price of beef (both local and commodity) often varies based a wide variety of factors. If a school desires a consistent price they may want to purchase larger quantities then price will remain constant until that supply runs out. Some schools may also secure a contract for supplying beef for an entire school year. The options available to schools to manage price variation will be similar for local or commodity beef.

Be sure to follow procurement regulations. For more information and local beef procurement templates, visit:

<http://www.montana.edu/mtfarmtoschool/beeftoschool.html>

22. How do I convince my school to support procuring local beef?

Schools have different reasons for serving local beef. Our case study sites reported the following top motivations for buying local beef: quality, community, agriculture and food literacy, and nutrition. Some schools report that serving and promoting local beef in school meals increased the number of students eating those meals (known as meal participation rate) and reduced waste. These are important factors for school meal programs. The National Farm to School Network's *Benefits of Farm to School Fact Sheet* is an excellent resource to demonstrate the potential impacts:

<http://www.farmtoschool.org/Resources/BenefitsFactSheet.pdf>

The *Montana Farm to Cafeteria Manual* (https://farmtocafeteria.ncat.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/03/FTC_Manual_2018.pdf) contains additional information on how you can lead the charge for local procurement.

Demonstrating other successful models is a great source of inspiration. Read the case study report *Moovoooving Forward Together: Strategies for Montana Beef to School* for detailed examples of successful beef to school initiatives:

<http://www.montana.edu/mtfarmtoschool/beeftoschool.html>

23. How should we promote beef to school in our community?

Promoting beef to school efforts is a great way to increase parent and community support of the school, and particularly, the school meals program. Use multiple outlets for sharing your beef to school story, such as:

- Include the local beef vendor's name and information on school menus, bulletin boards, and/or school announcements. Be sure to clearly mark on the menu when local beef is being served.
- Contact local news media to run a story about the school's successful beef to school efforts or their desire to start a program. Some schools have placed ads in the paper seeking donations from local ranchers or seeking ranchers or processors to purchase beef from.
- Invite parents and community members to eat school meals when local beef is served or offer a special meal. Read about Manhattan Christian School's special meal open to parents, grandparents, and community members:

<https://www.montana.edu/mtfarmtoschool/documents/successtories/MTF2SSuccess-ManhattanChristian-Oct2017.pdf>

- Use social media to announcement beef to school meals or events. Ask that the rancher and/or processor also post information on their social media accounts or website.
- If your school participates in Montana Harvest of the Month (www.montana.edu/mtharvestofthemoth), use the posters and other promotional materials to showcase the local beef being served.

24. How can we educate our school's students about local beef?

There are many great ways to provide educational opportunities for students to learn about local beef. Here are a few ideas:

- Bring ranchers, processors, or butchers into the classroom to talk about the industry and their careers.
- Take a field trip to a ranch or processing facility. Processing facilities can make great tours and field trips and they typically schedule tours on days/times that slaughter is not occurring.
- Use school announcements as an opportunity to provide interesting facts about beef and/or the ranch or processor prior to or on the day that local beef will be served in the school meals.
- If your school participates in Montana Harvest of the Month (www.montana.edu/mtharvestofthemoth), use the Classroom Bites beef handout and additional lessons to provide educational activities.

25. What are the economic advantages to my community by using local beef?

By using local beef, you are keeping money and resources circulating in your community. The business that you buy from in turn spends some of those funds within the community via payroll, purchases at other businesses, paying taxes, and in many cases supporting community and school events. A recent Minnesota-based study of the economic effects of local food purchasing cite a multiplier effect of anywhere from 1.7-2.9. This means that for every one dollar spent locally, there is somewhere between \$1.70-\$2.90 of economic impact stimulated downstream. To use the most optimistic number, that means if your school spent \$5,000 on local beef, it could mean almost \$15,000 in local economic benefits.

26. What beef to school resources are available, and where can I find them?

There are a number of beef to school resources available:

- The Montana Beef to School website is a great place to start (<http://www.montana.edu/mtfarmtoschool/beeftoschool.html>). Here you will find the following resources and information:
 - Background about the project
 - Case study report *Moovooing Forward Together: Strategies for Montana Beef to School*, for tips and stories about how to bring local beef into schools

- *How to Begin a Beef to School Program* fact sheet
- Resources for the Montana Harvest of the Month program, which includes beef as one of the featured foods
- Beef to school procurement templates
- Beef to school presentations and trainings including webinars and conference materials
- The Montana Farm to School website (<http://www.montana.edu/mtfarmtoschool/>) has resources about getting started purchasing, preparing, and promoting local foods in school meals and snacks.
- You can find local meat processors by using the following directories:
 - State-Inspected Facilities Directory: <http://liv.mt.gov/Meat-Milk-Inspection/Meat-and-Poultry-Inspection>
 - Federally-Inspected Facilities Directory: <http://www.fsis.usda.gov/wps/portal/fsis/topics/inspection/mpi-directory>
- Use the Montana Farm to School Facebook page to stay updated and connect with other members of the beef to school community: <https://www.facebook.com/montanafarmtoschool/>

27. What schools in Montana are currently using local beef? How can I contact them?

There are a number of schools and districts across Montana using local beef. You can check out the schools featured in the case study report *Mooving Forward Together: Strategies for Montana Beef to School*: <https://www.montana.edu/mtfarmtoschool/documents/BeefToSchool/Beef%20to%20School%20Project%20Case%20Study%20Report.pdf>

There are other schools not featured in the case study report that have been highlighted on the Montana Farm to School Facebook page: <https://www.facebook.com/montanafarmtoschool/>

You can locate schools that are currently participating in Montana Harvest of the Month or other farm to school initiatives on the Farm to Cafeteria Programs map: <https://farmtocafeteria.ncat.org/institutions/>

You can reach out to the foodservice director at the school if you have any questions, or contact Aubree Roth, Montana Farm to School Coordinator, Montana Team Nutrition, Montana State University at aubree.roth@montana.edu or (406) 994-5996.

28. Who do I contact if I have other questions?

If you haven't found the answer to your questions through those provided in this document, please contact:

- Montana Farm to School Facebook page
<https://www.facebook.com/montanafarmtoschool/>
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