

Division of Marketing  
Agricultural Development and Diversification (ADD) Program

1998 Grant Final Report

Grant Number 13038

**Grant Title**     Wisconsin Lamb Roll

**Amount Awarded**     \$25,500.00

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## The Wisconsin Lamb Roll Project

### Our Original Intent

The primary factors indicating a need for the project were three-fold: 1) To add value realized by the producer on a per-lamb basis, 2) To realize revenue by the processor of each lamb as a result of product development and efficiencies discovered, and 3) To act as an active marketing participant in place of the producer, thus reducing time and marketing expertise required by producers.

We originally intended to benefit Wisconsin shepherds, who generally do not get a price that reflects the cost of production. We expected to by-pass the ordinary market structure which regularly uses reductions in price for non-standard lambs, with the definition of "non-standard" often varying more widely than than Wisconsin's mostly part-time shepherds could easily accomodate. We attempted to change consumer perception of lamb meat in the market by replacing the traditional though costly chop-roast-sausage offerings with a muscle-dense, defatted, deboned, netted completely usable product. Our product would be extremely easy to prepare.

Our objectives have been met for the most part, with our one major adjustment coming unexpectedly from the processor link in our farm-to-consumer chain, when our original plant closed down in mid-summer of 1998. Due to the extreme shortage of federally inspected plants in Wisconsin a new processor convenient to our already trained cutter as well as to our producers was difficult to locate. Fitting into any new processors' schedules is made more challenging due to slaughter space available being dominated by youth meat animal sale lambs for nearly 4 months of every year.

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### How Our ADD Grant Helped Us Meet Our Goals

Although the idea of the lamb roll was a good one and some tentative attempts to market it were made in 1997 and early 1998, it had not generated sufficient income to give us access to the funds required to enter this very competitive field. We could not have successfully launched the project or exposed it to its proper audience without the ADD funds to raise us above the perpetually under-capitalized position small farmers - and very often sheep farmers - seem to experience.

Our marketing expertise has been sharpened by the help of the ADD program marketing specialists. Through networking with ADD personnel, University personnel, and sheep industry leaders throughout the state, we have been able to reach chefs all over the Midwest, and when they have tried the lamb roll, they have liked it. Currently we have several restaurants and caterers in the Chicago area using the roll. It is on the menu as a regular choice at one popular near northside Chicago restaurant with ties to several other locations in a line of strong corporate possibilities. Some of our challenges had to do with long-held beliefs among producers, for example, that a big lamb was necessarily a better lamb, but not so in lambs destined for the lamb roll. Another difficulty already alluded to was locating a slaughtering facility that was USDA approved when our first location closed, but even this was satisfactorily resolved. We continue to try to add the last piece of the puzzle: A distributor that can deal in the Illinois or Minnesota markets. This will probably solve itself when our volume builds to a proper critical level.

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### Our Public Outreach Efforts or Who Are Those Lamb Roll People?

As is expected in the sheep circles of Wisconsin, word of mouth has played its part in the strong traditional methods of this small, friendly producer industry, and we have benefited greatly from our past reputations. We have the support of our fellow sheep producers. The Wisconsin agricultural press has noted our progress as well, and continues to help us with positive articles. Food service educators have been quick to ask us to conduct seminars to instruct meatcutters on the methods of fabricating the roll so that producers who wish to market to restaurants in their own areas can do so while reducing the cost of distribution. We demonstrated the technique and conducted a cook-off for MATC chefs-in-training and used one MATC student as a helper at a major show. Young chefs at Fox Valley Technical School in Appleton participated in a second demonstration and Q and A session regarding lamb as a menu item in general. Our efforts were multiplied at the Wisconsin Restaurant Association Host Midwest Show in Milwaukee where we cooked and served hundreds of restaurant owners and chefs over a three day period. Our display at the Host Midwest Show was a selling as well as a teaching opportunity. With our two 24 x 36" full-color photographs of the roll and our newly printed brochures, we were able to reach out and grab the attention of an avid food-interested audience.

We conducted seminars for sheep producers ranging from the MATC Sheep Production Course and the Wisconsin Sheep Producers Annual Conference and the American Culinary Federation.

The Wisconsin Lamb Roll - Our Public Outreach, continued

Additionally, we provided tasting sessions to Randy Gottfredson's Sheep Production Course and the Vet Science faculty and staff at the University of Wisconsin Madison, to various political functions around the Madison area, to a graziers' conference, a Research, Conservation and Development income options for small farmers, seminar, and the Richland Sheep Focus group led by Joy Kirkpatrick in Richland Center. Our best "come and taste" dinner was with the help of Dr. Dennis Buege and for his colleagues at the Meat Animal Science Department. Many new possibilities and processing improvements arose from feedback from that event which will probably help us into the second phase of the lamb roll project as a whole.

## The Wisconsin Lamb Roll Project

### Our First Year - What Did We Learn?

We feel that we have met and exceeded our original expectations. The reception given to this new product by both restaurant owners and processors was extremely gratifying. Professionals picked up on the concept much more quickly and more fully than we expected, welcoming the lamb roll as a "new dimension in lamb", a way of saving preparation time and eliminating the myriad of cuts that cloud the marketing of lamb as a "difficult" food to cook. Over the course of marketing we have learned to listen to chefs very carefully and make good use of their very limited time. From the chefs we were able to pass on new techniques to the processor and to present a refined method of handling to new professionals just trying the product for the first time. Opinions from chefs and our samplers helped us to explore binding methods and other meat industry preparation technologies. On the producer side, we learned that shepherds are ready to market on volume that they control to a wider clientele in less time and with greater efficiency. Our Lamb Roll Grant was absolutely vital to our being able to expose these concepts to both sides of our market.

## The Wisconsin Lamb Roll Project

### How Will the Agricultural Industry Benefit?

The Wisconsin Lamb Roll Project has been candidly called the only "Up Thing" that has blossomed in the sheep industry in Wisconsin in ten years. Producers have been hugely supportive, re-enchanted in their enterprises, and anxious to cooperate. It is hoped that Wisconsin's some two thousand lamb producers, representing over twenty-five different breeds of sheep, and with limited production numbers in any one unit will benefit from this processing technique. The lamb roll utilized lean lambs of a lighter weight, thus requiring over-long periods for lambs to be kept on feed to simply add pounds of fat. Our producers still need to know what makes a lamb acceptable as a good, usable and commercial product, and the lamb roll provides immediate feedback in the form of qualitative descriptions of the product the producer has provided. Since knowing what makes a good lamb at the marketplace has always been difficult for producers to define, it is not unexpected that our one major commercial market, Equity Livestock, has been a willing and helpful proponent for the positive impact the lamb roll project has generated on the development of the sheep industry of Wisconsin as a whole. We can help use lambs leaner than the normal markets can efficiently use.

Hopefully, the lamb roll will open new markets in retail, wholesale and restaurant trades. Our little bite into meat technology may help to alleviate a major marketing problem - the centralized packer, whose numbers are dwindling and whose market mentality does not match the needs of America's consumers.