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Cattle producers bring Ft. Pierre packing plant back online

By Codi Vallery-Mills
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The slowing of meat processing at some of the nation's largest packing plants due to COVID-19 has spotlighted the need for smaller regional packing plants and locally owned locker facilities, according to Kim Ulmer of South Dakota. He is one of 13 investors that is pleased to be bringing a meat harvesting locker in Ft. Pierre back online this May.

"We saw it happen in the 80s with the pork industry where the large companies controlled the kill space and over 400,000 hog producers were wiped out. Now in the cattle industry, there are four packers that own over 85 percent of the kill space. Major corporations want producers to become employees and we can't have that," Ulmer says.

Once known as Bad River Pack, owned by Don and Mary Ward, the now updated facility is called U.S. Beef Producers and has investors from Minnesota, North Dakota, and South Dakota. "We are all cattle producers - either cattle feeders or ranchers - that have invested in this," Ulmer says.

With help from the Governor's Office of Economic Development, U.S. Beef Producers was able to secure a \$100,000 loan at a low-interest rate. "When I learned that the state was willing to help us with funding and the process of getting certified to operate it was a 'go' from then on and I really started putting the word out," Ulmer says. "I can't say enough how important it was for the state to be involved. It is important to give credit to where credit is due and Kyle Peters with Economic Development and David Bonde with Ft. Pierre Economic Development have been very helpful. It is important to



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This past weekend, U.S. Beef Producers test harvested 13 head of cattle in the old Bad River Pack facility in Ft. Pierre, S.D.

know this system and team in place in South Dakota really want to provide options to producers."

He says understanding and meeting the regulations in place has been the toughest challenge. "I can see why more cattle producers don't do this. The manual of requirements is 503 pages long. I'm glad the people that wrote the manual were thorough, but if at any point in this they could have offered a couple of hours of coaching to us that would have been helpful."

This past weekend the plant just went through a successful test run of 13 head. The USDA will rein-

spect May 1 and by June 1 the plant should have federal inspection criteria in place.

"We have a goal of harvesting 35 head a week by August 1. We want to get to 70 head a week but we will need to add on cooler space first," Ulmer says.

The locker plant has a three-legged approach to how the facility will harvest and market the cattle. First, the locker will be providing a custom harvest for cattle producers wanting to butcher their own livestock. Second, the initial investors and other cattle producers wanting to harvest and market their beef can do so under the U.S. Beef Producers label direct to households.

Third, the U.S. Beef Producers will be pursuing supplying their country of origin, source-verified labeled beef in grocery stores. Currently, the facility is looking for cattle producers in each South Dakota county to act as retail sale reps to help get U.S. Beef Producer labeled meat in stores, restaurants and schools.

"This year has proven that the big four meatpackers can't continue to handle everything. We want to take this model of small, clean processing plants that are producer-owned and duplicate them all over the country. This is going to be 'producer to plate.' Traditionally getting meat to the retail level has been a five-step process. Now it is less with cattlemen and women able to harvest cattle and market them direct," Ulmer said.

New Collection Box In Service



COURTESY PHOTO

A new 24-hour collection box has been installed at the Thomas County Courthouse for use by residents. Please deposit work in the box that needs to be processed by Thomas County officials.

Thomas County Clerk Lorissa Hartman reports as of Friday morning, May 1, there have been 267 requests for early voting ballots for the May 12 Primary Election.

While Nebraskans have been "hunkering down" during COVID-19, every voter in the state received an early ballot request form in early April. Voters have heavily utilized early ballot request.

The polls will be open in Nebraska on Tuesday, May 12.

Clerk Hartman said voters may cast their ballots in person from 8:00 a.m. until 8:00 p.m. at the Thomas County Courthouse located at 503 Main Street, Thefdorf.

"We will have hand sanitizer available for the public coming into the polls that day," she said. "Election poll workers will have masks, face shields, gloves, and hand sanitizer available for

their use. The voter will be given their own individual pen to use, no reuse of pens to mark the ballot. There will be tape on the floor to mark 6 foot distances, and a limit of 10 people will be allowed in the courtroom at a time. This will include the poll workers and voters."

Thomas County now has a 24-hour drop box for patrons to use.

"All of us thank you for your patience and understanding at this time. It's tough on us too to adjust to the lack of interaction and speed of service," Clerk Hartman said. "We are such a small crew with offices that work closely together and the quarantine regulations are strict. If any of us are exposed we will all have to quarantine, therefore making services unavailable to you. We sincerely do not want that to happen. Stay healthy Thomas County."

*Let's Shower Our Area
2020 Seniors
With Cards & Encouragement!
See special four page color section
inside this issue.*

USDA Forest Service Releases New Online Tools

The Rocky Mountain Region of the USDA Forest Service is releasing a new online tool as a place to find recreation updates and closures for any of the 24 national forests and grasslands across Colorado, Kansas, Nebraska, South Dakota and Wyoming.

This online tool provides a one-stop resource for learning about current USDA Forest Service recreation site status updates, alerts, warnings and fire restriction information within the states of Colorado, Kansas, Nebraska, South Dakota and Wyoming.

The Rocky Mountain Region continues to ask all forest and grassland visitors engaging in dispersed recreation, such as hiking, mountain biking or river rafting, to take extra precautions and adhere to the following safety and responsibility guidelines.

Stay close to home to keep other communities safe.

Stay 6 feet apart from others.



Avoid crowding in parking lots, trails, scenic overlooks and other areas.

Take CDC precautions to prevent illnesses like COVID-19.

Prepare for limited or no services, such as restroom facilities and garbage collection.

Prepare to pack out trash and human waste.

All offices are conducting business and providing virtual services. For specific forest and grassland information, please visit the region's forest and grassland directory.

Prairie Grouse Numbers Higher on the Fort Pierre National Grassland

USDA Forest Service staff on the Fort Pierre National Grassland have now completed their annual spring survey of prairie grouse. The number of greater prairie-chickens this spring was much higher than in spring 2019. Specifically, 479 prairie-chickens were tallied in April 2020 compared to 353 in April 2019. Sharp-tailed grouse also increased, with 88 males being counted in 2020 compared to 80 in 2019.

Nesting conditions on the Fort Pierre National Grassland are currently excellent due to the abundant residual grass available to nesting hens. Annual habitat quality surveys in autumn 2019 documented 66% high structure vegetation, well above the management



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objective of 30% to 50%.

These results, however, do not mean that everything is ideal for the prairie grouse. As District Ranger Dan Svingen explains: "We have only received a fraction of our expected moisture in

April. Timely rains in May and June will be critical to the success of this year's nesting efforts".

For more information, please call the Fort Pierre Ranger District at 605-224-5517.