



Fellow Connoisseurs of Food Raised in Sunshine.



April 3, 2022

Winter, Spring, Summer or Fall? Thanks to the lyrics of Carol King and an epic boost from James Taylor, this little five word mnemonic is how a good many of us recall the change of seasons. But standing to face the *music*, it becomes evident as to the reason she didn't write *Spring, Summer, Fall or Winter... All you got to do is splinter...* and that reason is obvious... that's just plain stupid! No, *Winter* had to come first so that *Fall* could be *there* to rhyme with *call*. And the rest is just song-writing history.

Like the Chicken-or-the-Egg conundrum, which season really is "first"? Apologies to Carol King, but she got it all wrong. Doesn't matter if the words won't rhyme or anyone's personal preferences. There's only one season with the conditions necessary to nurture the seed from the soil and the blossoms from the buds while painting the fields green with biological nitrogen. That season is - Spring.

As a grower, Spring is a time of immense preparation. It feels compulsory and imminent. It is a known future departure with an arbitrarily unknown departure date. Our ship must be ready to set sail at Mother Nature's bequest. Once our ship leaves the dock, we will only return to the stability of that dock at the onset of Winter.

This season we find ourselves preparing to push off from the stability of that dock with our feet straddling two separate ships. One foot will be on the Farming ship while the other straddles to the Processing ship. We've all been there... that precarious moment with one foot on the dock and one in the boat, hoping we don't end up in the drink. Our challenge this season will be to keep these two ships running close and always parallel to each other. I suppose you could say we're hoping these two ships quickly evolve into a catamaran of sorts - two separate hulls homogeneously attached as one. Farming and Processing - a necessity imposed upon us by circumstances outside our control.

In many ways it's exciting. In equally as many ways, this parallel sailing venture is laden with the anxieties inherent to the unknowns. I've put an immense amount of work into eliminating as many unknowns as possible. The tangibles are relatively easy. It is the timing of the harvests to which this first season will beg for your flexibility.

As many look to the pricing page first: No increase in Grassfed Beef or Pastured Eggs; The 20 cent bump for Chickens and Pork reflects added costs imposed on the farm, not an improvement to the farm's profit. The costs for processing are the same or very similar to what everyone would be paying if we were still participating in local processing.

As you read on, here's our *Sailing Itinerary* to be addressed in the pages that follow: 2021 season in the rear view mirror; Drought: What happened with the local butchers?; How are we now planning to keep two ships afloat? Status of the new processing unit; DIY Cut & Wrap option - (Where the Y stands for You!)

Looking Back

2021 was a season in which we functioned all season, knowing full well our ship was taking on water. In spite of the drought and the background knowledge that we had lost all reasonable access to processing in 2022, we were able to pull off a reasonably successful season. Because of the unknowns in the mind at the time, I initiated what was more or less a liquidation of the beef herd with the intent on mitigating risks associated with carrying over lighter animals (as we didn't yet have any firm plan for how we would get any animals processed in 2022 and beyond). This liquidation was in many ways akin to the old adage of consuming our seed corn. If we did find some miraculous means of processing animals in 2022, we wouldn't have any beef available in July. Yet this was simply the first stage of the larger question at hand. With the farming season running in high gear, there was no time for research and contemplation. Those ruminations would have to come immediately after the final beef/pork pickup in early October but before the normal replacement calves are brought onto the farm in early November. In other words, if it looked like we were going to be forced to throw in the towel, that towel had to drop by Halloween - a scary prospect, indeed.

Amidst this backdrop, the logistical aspects of the fall harvests did not go as smoothly as we would have liked. As I began the last minute liquidation of the beef herd in September, I had to provide on-the-hoof estimates as to anticipated hanging weights (in context to how much this would cost). Whereas my high and low ranges were found to be accurate, my inaccuracies we're revealed in that the diversity of weights were skewed heavily within the larger and medium weights. Smaller weights existed yet the requests for smaller weights exceeded the realities. Historically, it turns out I had just been lucky in consistently finding a match between actual weights and individual weight requests. To this end, I cringed when I found myself assigning heavier weights to some people who had expected lighter quarters.

My apologies to those of you affected by this situation.

Drought

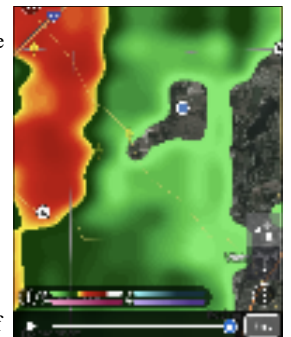
It is common knowledge that 2021 went in the books with a substantial rain deficit for much of Wisconsin and northern Illinois. When people had asked how farming had been throughout 2021, my response had always made mention of

the effects of the drought. The response from people living north and northwest of our farm has always been "yes, it's been dry by us too".

It appears very few people living outside of the Severe Drought zone realize the substantial difference between adjacent deficit areas. The Wisconsin counties of Racine and Kenosha as well as Lake and McHenry counties in Illinois, have received substantially less precipitation than any other counties in either state. In these radar screenshots with the blue dot representing our farm, we failed to receive even a drop of rain. I could create a montage of similar screenshots which led to the same result. The number of times in 2021 when I witnessed the rains falling just north of our farm - often substantial soaking rains - had been uncanny. As silly as it sounds, it started to feel as if there was some bubble around us. We did not receive one single soaking rain in all of 2021. This rain which we have received in late March of 2022 is the heaviest in well over a year. Our pond's condition is abysmal. With no snowmelt, the spring water level is over two feet down whereas it's normally always been overflowing in spring through early summer.

So how did we achieve a relatively successful season without the benefit of soaking rains? We robbed Peter to pay Paul.

Historically with our low, heavy gumbo soils, we have not been able to move our beef herd onto a routine pasture rotation until early to mid May. Even though we've always taken advantage of the short term April dry spells to acclimated the the herd's ruminans from hay to grass, rarely has the formerly wet conditions of April allowed us to move the entire herd out of the winter feed area and into a full monthly cycle of



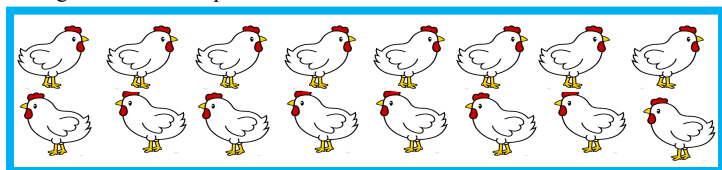
rotation grazing. 2021 was very different. With no precipitation after snow-melt, the herds at both the home farm and the 40 (the acreage NW of the home farm) were moved to pasture in early mid April and stayed in rotation without the wet conditions that normally force us back. It seemed then that the spring of 2021 might be the first time that both herds might actually be able to keep up with the spring blaze of growth. It has been common for the spring blaze of growth to get ahead of the herd, all too often going to seed. Yet going into week five and six of the first grazing cycle, the pasture conditions were already revealing the path of 2021. This is the time period in which the herds have zigged and zagged through all the paddocks, terminating the rotation right back where they started. Unfortunately, because there had been zero precipitation, the paddocks at the start of the second rotation were not yet ready to be grazed. Grazing a paddock too soon diminishes the rate of regrowth. This lackluster regrowth is compounded upon each successive rotation. Damage the roots early - pay for the error all season. I thus found myself in an unprecedented predicament in late May. We were running out of grass. I had to decide to either move both herds back to the winter feed area to feed hay, or, incorporate our hay paddocks into the grazing rotation effectively buying time for hopeful rains to replenish the formerly grazed paddocks. Either way, with my crystal ball still in the repair shop, it's little more than a shake of dice. Moving cattle back onto hay after they've had a routine on spring pasture will almost certainly move cattle performance backwards. It would be one thing if they were in a location where they couldn't see me. But the hay feeding areas are closest to the people areas so every time I'm in site, they all bunch up against the fence and beller at me to let them back out onto grass. They'll do this almost all day, not eating a thing. (What? You weren't thinking that humans invented the Hunger Strike, were ya?!)

So... Our First Cutting of hay didn't get run through the baler. The cattle ate it all, future be damned. The First Cutting of hay represents 60-70% of total season hay potential.

Now if you're now saying to yourself that all I did was kick the can, you'd normally be right. However, this already wasn't a normal season. I had new information in my head at that time informing me that after this season, "the road" might well be a Dead End. I had only recently learned we had lost our access to processing for 2022 and beyond. (Details on this later.) Hay is for winter feed. Winter feed is for 2022 and 2023 cattle, which living in that moment, looked increasingly less likely to be a factor in the equation.

So... Full speed ahead. Damn the Torpedoes.

It is at this moment in late May that all of the season's ever-evolving ingredients were prematurely tossed into the *September Soup* and put on the stove far too early in the season. The story now becomes entangled, not just with the effects of unprecedented early drought and the bombshell news of lost 2022 processing, but also the complications induced by the butchers with the 2021 processing dates. Before we get into this, we need to first stop everything else and forget about it for two weeks while we prep and process chickens. The little graphic below represents this time period. Feel free to fast-forward through this two week period.



Okay, we're back. To recap: It was late May. We're out of grass; It's not raining; We recently learned (by accident) that we didn't have processing for 2022; We next made the decision to forfeit our winter hay in order to keep cattle moving on grass. As odd as it may seem, this recap is the perfect segue into the processing situation. Why? As you will learn, we ended up doubling-up on 2021 June/July beef harvest dates. This lucky break will now allow us to prematurely reduce our herd size in June to take some pressure off slow growing pastures.

Loss of Processors - What Happened?

Up through 2019, reasonably sufficient reservations could be made over the phone at any butcher six to eight months in advance. Yes the writing was on the wall, as some quantity restrictions were being imposed, however not yet severe. The noticeable difference over the preceding few years was leadtime. It became prudent to make reservations earlier and earlier to assure sufficient openings for the larger quantities our farm required.



In 2020, all of this changed. We all experienced the circumstances at the grocery store. We all most likely also recall that the workers at large meat processing plants represented some of the first essential workers of Covid. These slaughterhouse workers were being forced by presidential decree to return to the cutting floor or risk termination. The decision to return culminated in the death of many and the perpetual spread of the virus to others. This left the large processing plants with inadequate staffing ultimately leading to the bare shelves in supermarket meat aisles across the country. Demand for meat processing instantly saturated all levels of existing potential, from the mega-plants down to the local custom shop. The local shops became inundated with panic-driven new callers intent on raising their own livestock to assure a supply of meat. These new callers either had a few acres available to raise a hog or steer or had connections to resources on a local farm. Either way, this was new demand being imposed upon an already burdened supply of local butchers.

Let's pick this up as the conditions existed in May of 2020. Normally we wouldn't be concerned with making reservations for 2021 at this stage as we would've expected to make 2021 summer and fall reservations in October of 2020. Word is getting out that the butcher's are quickly filling for 2021. Detjens calls me. (Please keep this last statement in mind.) She tells me our normal time slot for 2021 is at risk and requests my 2021 reservations in advance. Not yet knowing the circumstances at Hansen's or Lake Geneva, I take no chances. I reserve a solid block of beef for late June plus our normal schedule of beef and pork for the September and October harvests. The June beef dates were high risk. We don't (and can't) offer farm pickup of Detjens-processed meats in June/July. As such, I'd have to find a fair amount of people (32 quarters of beef) who would be willing to drive to Watertown to pickup their order. I accepted that risk. Upon finalizing the reservations with Detjens, I immediately called Hansen's to learn of an entirely different tact they were implementing. Hansen's would only accept 2021 reservations for January through June. All July through December 2021 reservations (the busy time) wouldn't be accepted until January 4, 2021. For 20 years, I had made July reservations with Hansen's, pleading with them to please accept my usual timeslot, even offering concessions on quantity. While the initial response was a firm no, I asked that my request be passed on to the owner. He called me a few days later and granted the request. As you will learn as you read on, this would be the last time our farm's 25 years of previous business mattered to any of the butchers.

Recap: We've buttoned down an excessive amount of beef for June/July. (Recall that we normally don't use Detjens for June/July.) I hang on to Detjens June beef regardless, still uncertain as to the status of the other butchers. Not yet mentioned is that Lake Geneva is holding out on accepting any 2021 reservations.

Now it's a waiting game. Calves are weaned in October and November. Should we accept the risk of raising animals when we have no assurance of processing those animals? It's \$30,000 just to wean calves plus 2-3% body weight in hay every day we feed. Roll the dice and put an ear to the ground. Word gets around that Hansen's late half of 2021 is likely to fill up within hours on January 4. I call Hansen's and ask for their protocol. They have none, other than to tell me to call early. I decide not to take the risk. I plan to arrive in Hansen's parking lot at 3am on January 4. Turns out I'm not alone but fortunately, I'm number 9 on the unmarked clipboard I accidentally stumble upon. I also learn that the phones were turned off for this reservation process. The only people awarded reservations were those who camped out early in the parking lot.

It's a cold winter night and I'm sitting in the butcher's parking lot at 3 am on the Monday after New Years. It feels surreal. This same process used to take five minutes over the phone. Others trickled in over the next two hours. However it was starting at 5 am in which the chaos began. By 6 am, the parking lot was gridlocked, requiring professional Tetris skills to navigate a vehicle. By 7 am, both sides of the highway were lined with cars and trucks for hundreds of feet in both directions. By the time the doors opened at 8:00, hundreds of people had their name on the list. I was elated to be number 9. It was dog-eat-dog. Be standing front and center when they called your name off the list or forfeit. In so many ways, the process was humiliating. The customer/provider relationship was turned inside-out. I was there to grovel for the opportunity to pay a premium for their services. As I stepped to the window, extremities frozen, I was greeted by three people sitting on comfy chairs with a hot cup of coffee in hand. It was the owner, his wife and daughter. He knows me. The wife and daughter not so much.

His wife keeps the books so she's doing the talking. I make my requests, already giving concessions over previous years. They are rejected. I pry, ever-so-gently, reminding of past history. A few whispers are traded. They provide their final answer as to what they'll allow from me. It's 4 beef and 10 hogs. Historically they've accepted 10 beef and 20 hogs or more.



They tell me I should be happy with what I got as they've broken the rules to get me the 4 and the 10. This may be a consolation for the hobbyists, but a farm cannot earn a living with these numbers.

To them, I should recognize how lucky I am. Yet I walk away knowing full well that with these low numbers, we're on the path towards losing our ability to continue farming.

Having lived in this area my entire life, I knew, or new of, many people in that crowd. As many of us were wiggling our extremities to stay warm, coffee-clutching in small circles of conversation, I made a point of learning as much about the unknown people as possible by asking others who they knew and why they are here. Point being: How many people in that parking lot earn their living from obtaining these reservations? My estimated conclusion was that more than half were hobbyist. A hobbyist's loss of access to processing equates to under the counter pocket change. When a working farm loses access, the community loses a job creator and local economic stimuli.

The Proverbial Straw

In March of 2021, Detjen utilized Facebook as their exclusive means of filling the entire 2022 season. The only people to know of this were those who happened to have "liked" Detjen's Facebook page. Recall earlier how I asked you to remember Detjen's having our back in 2020 by calling us. All that was now gone. No call. No letter. No email. No earlier warning or heads-up. Unbeknownst to us, the loss of our ability to farm came without as much as a whisper. I only found out when I called in mid May to inquire as to how they were going to handle 2022. After she informed me that they allowed the schedule to fill, I asked why she hadn't called or emailed. She responded that it was posted on Facebook for everyone to see, stated with a final voice inflection inferring that I had been given the same opportunity as everyone else. I cringed a bit, realistically reminding her that farmer's don't necessarily use Facebook routinely, much less for important business. She responded tersely "well we can't call everybody". I told her this would put us out of business. The only response was "we didn't know what else to do".

People Detjen's have never done business with were given access to highly coveted processing reservations. Our farm has delivered over \$175,000 in sales into her family business... And they didn't know what else to do.

When I dropped off our final load of livestock at Hansen's this past October, the previous owner, a now elderly man who still works side-by-side with the newest owner, was there to assist. This was the same gentleman whom 25 years earlier, as the owner of Hansen's, had recognized our farm as an opportunity for his business. It was a beautiful Sunday afternoon when myself and two little kids in tow, arrived with that first load of cattle. Regardless of the likelihood that he had better things to be doing on that fine Sunday afternoon, he didn't just get us unloaded and send us on our way. He invited us in to give the kids a tour of the facility. Now 25 years later, as I unload the last trailer of animals I'll ever bring to Hansen's, this same gentleman tells me the schedule is full of so many new people he's never seen before, wondering who they were and where they all came from. For me, this final trip was already weighing heavy on my mind. With our farm's viability in free fall after that fateful May phone call with Detjen's, this unload represented the final moment of impact. I think to myself... He must not know... So I tell him that this is our farm's last delivery to Hansen's. Because of our inability to obtain sufficient processing dates, we're now out-of-business. He turned away with a somewhat startled look, saying nothing as he walked into the building. Perhaps he had no idea. Perhaps he realized he'd just stepped in something to which he preferred not to further entangle himself. It's not his doing as it's no longer his call. Yet to have expressed that sentiment upon our very moment of loss, was very telling.

Our kids went to high school with the kids whose parents own Hansen's. We attended the same school functions over all those school years. Both families drove down Main Street in the same Homecoming parade, volunteering our decorated farm trucks and trailers as a platform for the FFA kids.

In Detjen's case, their family members have had their boots on the ground at our family farm for over 20 years. They know we operate a working farm. They openly recognize that half of their business is consumed by hobbyists. I know this because I've asked.

For over two decades, our farm's business has driven over \$350,000 through the cash registers at Hansen's and Detjen's. Once-upon-a-time, we were a valued customer. How could such a long standing business relationship be severed

with such a complete lack of empathy as to the severe impact of the severance? I struggle with this, if only because it causes me to lose faith in humanity. This was all such a cold-shoulder sendoff. Within my personal playbook of life, I find this behavior to be unconscionable. Not in search of rationalization, but rather, in search of a hidden perspective internal to the butcher's walls, I will attempt to read between the lines.



Between-the-Lines

Standing in the butcher's shoes in 2020 and 2021, I see demand that exceeds supply by perhaps a 3 to 1 ratio. Their workload is locked and loaded for two years, or more if they so choose. Prices have risen in accordance to demand. From the outside, it would appear as a great time to operate a custom processing facility. But it's a unique trade with dying interest. Few people are willing to do the work. Expansion and automation is abhorrently expensive and consequently, risky. As is the case with farming, the average age of a custom shop owner is right around 60. They're tired of the risks and tired of the revolving door of employees. When confronted with a long line of customers, the simplest thing to do is ration their capacity, first come, first served.

Second to this foundational atmosphere lies the reality that "opportunity is knocking". With a seemingly endless supply of customers, now is the time to jettison the expensive customers. Organic-minded customers are most certainly more expensive. We ask more questions. We take more time on the phone. We care about ingredients. We are often perceived as elitists. We think our product is better. Amidst this moment, we need to remind ourselves that most every custom butcher shop also offers quarters and halves of farm-raised meats. A butcher providing a product that competes for the same (similar) market share has been willingly participating as gatekeeper by allowing a competing product to enter this very limited niche market.

Also lurking in the backdrop is the reality that grassfed cattle are usually lighter than bunk-fed cattle. A butcher's capacity is generally defined by head count yet they are paid by the pound. It takes just as long to kill and dress a 900 lb steer as it does a 1400 lb steer. When the 900 lb steer arrives at the cutting table, the butcher will receive 500 lbs less pay potential. True that they will cut and wrap less meat. Yet fabricating the specific cut from the carcass takes almost the same amount of time. It is primarily the division and handling of that fabricated cut that adds additional time.

This last between-the-lines aspect is focused exclusively on the arrangement we had with Detjen's. I should preface this discussion by first reminding you that this arrangement was previously initiated with Country Cutters in Reeseville. They did this for us for a few years in the early 2000's before deciding they could not continue with the arrangement.

The arrangement is quite unique. The impetus behind the arrangement is centered upon the lack of sufficient custom butchering available in SE WI and NE IL (aka... The place where all our customers live.) Because the butcher is too far for most customers to retrieve their order, the arrangement was made for the butcher to stage all orders in their freezer, allowing us to retrieve all orders on one bulk pickup day for transport back to the farm on a specified customer farm pickup day. Detjen's was happy to accept this arrangement 20 years ago. Personnel changed. Times changed.

I don't have any inside knowledge as to exactly how Detjen's felt about this arrangement. I suspect that if they had a large freezer, they may have been more willing to maintain the arrangement. Two weeks worth of product sitting still in their freezer created gridlock. Yes, our farm's products represented most of their work for those two weeks but not all so they still had to work around it. A benefit for them was they didn't have to deal with the time and expense of 50 separate transactions, as we inherited this expense only two hours later on our farm pickup days. But they did need to come to the shop an hour early with employees to get the truck loaded. This arrangement started out with only the additional charge to buy the boxes, later evolving into an ever-increasing boxing labor charge for filling, sealing and handling the boxes. That \$5 per quarter beef and \$5 per half of pork we were adding to your processing invoice did not cover our costs to retrieve all these orders from Watertown. Yet even as these handling costs were increased at-will each season, sensing the increased frustration with freezer gridlock, I provided zero push-back, accepting the increases as a cost of maintaining the arrangement. I believe that, had I provided even the slightest resistance to these material handling increases, I would have instantly sunk my own ship.

The Irony of it All

Most of you are aware that the subject of On-Farm-Slaughter (OFS) has been a frequent topic within these pages over the years. Prior to the summer of 2019, OFS had been deemed illegal* by the DATCP for any meats consumed by anyone other than the farm owner. Hence, all farm sales to customers had to be processed through the bottleneck of local custom butchers.



**Some years back, the DATCP sent letters to OFS butchers warning of incarceration to any butcher caught processing OFS-derived meats for anyone other than the farmer. Within this same time period, the DATCP called our farm (me) directly to interrogate and validate that recent OFS meats were to be consumed exclusively by our family. The discussion was followed with the threat of criminal consequences if any such OFS meats were to be sold to others.*

I have personally been taking this fight to the DATCP for decades via editorials published in the Wisconsin State Farmer, the public pages of our website and the protest call-ins I've requested from you, our farm's supporters. I know many of you have told me you've called the DATCP to protest this restrictive OFS policy.

In early spring of 2019, the Wisconsin State Farmer published my most recent editorial against the Farm Bureau and DATCP. I had to fight to get this op-ed published, finally speaking directly with the paper's editor. After conceding to unusual size restrictions, my op-ed was finally published. The paper version was prefaced with the largest disclaimer I've yet to see in the paper, stating my opinions did not reflect the views of the Wisconsin State Farmer. (The Wisconsin Farm Bureau freely uses the Wisconsin State Farmer editorial page as if their own PR vehicle.)

Shortly after my op-ed was published, the DATCP quietly rescinded the rule, not announcing this arbitrary policy change to any of the state's custom processors. Detjens found out by accident. The DATCP told Detjens the original rule had been misunderstood, as if to suggest that OFS should always have been allowed. Based on the aforementioned strident DATCP policing, this most certainly was not the case. The rationale which the DATCP provided is what people say when they are backed in a corner and desire to extricate themselves while still saving face.

Detjens was the last butcher in this part of Wisconsin to still possess a functioning mobile OFS unit. Detjens has never had their own kill floor. Detjens has been dependent upon hand-shake arrangements with competing butchers to utilize their kill floors (Country Cutters and others) in order to bring sellable meat into their own store. Those arrangements were becoming increasingly expensive and tenuous. The existence of their family business was tethered to these arrangements. Demand at Country Cutters was increasing. Country Cutters needed kill floor capacity for their own work. Detjens was at risk of losing their business.

In spring of 2019, OFS was quietly deemed legal. With this single DATCP ruling change, Detjens was thrown a life-line. The red ink associated with their tenuous kill floor sharing arrangements was instantly converted to a new form of income. Their shop would now be supplied exclusively via this newly liberated OFS policy. Others are now also entering the market offering OFS mobile services.



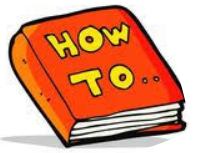
Meanwhile, the farmer that had a likely hand in liberating OFS* was denied access to this newly liberated OFS opportunity, effectively removing the farmer from the ability to participate in the market he may likely have been instrumental in liberating.

**It is understood that correlation is not causation. Perhaps there were other factors influencing the allowance of OFS. Given the DATCP's history with OFS, it is reasonable to state that this policy change did not come from within it's ranks. Regardless of the idiom stating that correlation is not causation, there is zero evidence that any of the OFS ruling benefactors (existing processors) had invested any time publicly protesting the old restriction. For the vast majority of custom processors, OFS represents competition.*

How To...Not Lose the Farm

I'm writing this newsletter so obviously we're still kicking. Reading on, you'll see how the options really weren't necessarily options after all.

Here are some base-level variables: We own 101 acres in SE WI; In good years, 80 of these acres are grazeable; In good years, 60 of these acres are tillable; Land prices are highly competitive, being commensurate to population, urbanization and a still healthy agricultural community; Our farm business foundation is built upon marketing directly to the end consumer; Our capital infrastructure is based exclusively on multi-species livestock; We've lost access to sufficient processing; OFS has recently been allowed.



Kicking Some Tires - A few Back-of-the-Napkin Option Pros/Cons

Commodities: Requires thousands of acres and a dependency upon subsidies.
Cow/Calf: Requires acreage for 500 cows and 500 calves (if \$100/hd profit).
Sell Livestock to Sales Barn: Sales price competes head on with industrial feed-lots.
Raise Organic Feeder Pigs: Long term potential with infrastructure reset.
Convert farm to produce: Market upscale. Scrap existing infrastructure.
Wholesale Pastured Meats: Earning half the margin doubles livestock quantity.
Implement OFS. Process all livestock to end consumer ourselves.
Or do none of the above. Quit Farming.
Witness three decades of blood, sweat and tears deteriorate.

Certainly the above is not intended to represent all options. Yet even with 100 options listed, the immediate influences in respect to the viability of any option are acreage requirements and relative compatibility to existing infrastructure. We are after all, in our early 60's.

Of course, we could do any of these things at some scale on our small acreage. The objective is to be able to continue to *earn a living* from small acreage. If we were just 10 years younger, perhaps we'd be able and willing to convert to raising produce. Yet based on the competition for the high volume farmer's market spaces, I'd be questioning whether our area really needs more produce farmers. Fertility has to come from a chemical bottle or the back-end of livestock. Hooves are needed on the soil. At this stage of life, we either process our own via OFS or we're backed into the corner that tells us to quit.

Building a Facility

Our society - Wisconsin representing an especially egregious example - has established defacto policies which ultimately force a business to go all in or all out. In respect to building a processing facility to meet the letter of law in Wisconsin, it is commonly quoted at an expense of 2 to 3 million. Assuming all zoning, environmental and nimbysism is overcome, the owner of this facility must then find a workforce willing to perform the skilled work inherent to a meat processing facility. With this level of investment, the facility must be fully utilized to receive a return on investment.



This establishment criteria allows no avenue for an agricultural entrepreneur who wishes to market to a clientele whom is actively seeking a hybrid Farmer/Processor arrangement. In order to achieve a return on investment, an entrepreneur must choose the occupation of farmer or processor, or, choose to accept the expense and risks inherent to owning both businesses while trusting the operation of farm or abattoir to an employee. This is at best, myopic, and at worst, a racket in which government protects vested interests.

Amidst the Bigger Picture

Affecting change upon these governmental norms is akin to the inertia witnessed as a locomotive commences pulling a train of 100 cars. The locomotive represents change. The caboose represents vested interests and their correlating governmental regulators. Everything in between represents society.



Every one of those 100 coupling reveals the time frame necessary to induce a change in each successive follower. The lead cars move a considerable distance, gradually picking up speed as each successive car *accepts* this new change of direction. Yet the cars in the very back have yet to move an inch. The caboose occupants can hear it coming, each forward coupler taking up that slack. They have time to think. Unlike all the cars following that locomotive, this last car has a unique feature. The caboose has a brake. In spite of the willingness of all middle cars to follow the lead, if the movement is detrimental to the interests of these occupants, the caboose occupants will set the brake.

This analogy attempts to shine a spotlight on the foundational problems that plague our society. Vested interests are indeed myopic - and understandably so. Their interests are legally-binding. They must provide value to shareholders - with complete indifference to blatantly obvious societal and environmental concerns. This is why Citizen's United was akin to a nuclear bomb-drop upon the arena of societal hierarchy. Any one of us remains free to become that locomotive, enrolling others to jump on the train. Yet in respect to the changes of the greatest urgency, every one of these movements becomes burdened by the friction of an anchored immobile caboose - staffed by vested interests. Far too often, our only avenue for innovation exists if, and only if, that innovation can ultimately be utilized or made to conform to existing industrial norms. We've lost the ability to innovate. Industry regulations are in effect, defacto obstructions to innovation.

Think of the liabilities of any full time meat processing facility. Recognize the nimbyism (Not-In-My-Backyard) which always accompanies every proposal. The nearby city of Franklin recently lost a new meat processing plant to nimbyism. It is the combination of animal volume and duration which ultimately gives cause for concern.

In respect to beef processing, 400 pounds of every 1000 pounds brought into any full time facility is treated as hazardous waste. Livestock must endure the stress of being removed from their normal habitat, forced into a trailer, transported on highways, unloaded into facilities where their manure does not land on welcoming soil. Their blood, offal and hides are destined for landfill. All of this carrying the added burden necessitating the combustion of diesel to achieve these ends.

The benefit? Food safety inspection under the guise of controlled conditions. Why the *guise*? Because livestock and carcasses are intermixed with carcasses from around the region or even the globe. Because the volume of animals is abhorrent to nature. Because the intensity - the hourly duration of animals being processed - is abhorrent to nature. Above all, because perpetual volumes of wet and warm globally-derived carcasses existing within the confined walls of a single facility represents itself as a pathogen's paradise - a prime vector for pathogen proliferation and adaptation. Tyson's IBP plant in Dakota City, Nebraska spans 42 acres of roof, to which in a five day work week, over 30,000 beef are slaughtered and processed on concrete.

Processing on the farm is the great mitigator of all these concerns. The animal keeps it's feet on the soil until it's last second. The aforementioned 40% of it's live weight is no longer waste requiring diesel fuel to transport to special landfills, but an asset to the soils of the very farm which nurtured it's existence. The aspect imposing the greatest bacterial threat - the kill and evisceration - is not performed within dank concrete walls, but outdoors in open air and sunshine, moving frequently to distribute nutrients. Offal is blended with carbonaceous materials in the farm's carefully managed compost pile. The farmer is vested in the safety concerns of this composting process, not by governmental decree, but by the realization that every pound of fertility recycled on the farm is an expensive pound of fertility the farmer does not have to purchase. There's no mixing of live animals from anywhere other than those animals raised directly on the farm. The farm's yearly volume is akin to a few brief moments at an industrial facility.

By allowing a farm to hybridize in concert with performing it's own processing, the pathogenic vectors associated with high density, high duration environments, are effectively diminished, if not eliminated.

This last statement is neither opinion nor ideology. Biology is a pragmatic science, readily revealing causes and effects. We mitigate the causes, we mitigate the effects.

Our new OFS process won't be inspected by anyone other than our customers. This is identical to how we've processed chickens successfully for over 20 years. Detjens mobile OFS also does not require an inspector. In respect to the dressing of the carcass, nothing changes. The difference is that Detjens mobile returns to a facility which is randomly inspected, (like a restaurant). For our farm, transparency and direct consumer access are paramount to Relationship Marketing. The consumer places their trust, not in an inspector, but in the methods and character traits of the provider.

An Ounce of Prevention



Intermittent low volume processing mitigates biological vectors.

A Pound of Cure



Persistent high volume processing attenuates pathogenic vectors.

We are already deep into the build of a small scale OFS processing unit. This unit is being built inside a 26x8x8 van body mounted on a gooseneck trailer. It is being modeled after a similar unit recently built to USDA spec and approved by state inspection in another state. It will meet the letter of the law. However, we farm in Wisconsin, a state which has demonstrated little tolerance for any form of processing other than industrial. I would love to receive WI approval. I'm certain the facility would meet construction and cleanliness guidelines. However I don't see the path which would allow an open-minded inspector to approve such an establishment. So much depends upon the individual sent to evaluate. Our risk is the same either way: We lose the farm if we don't continue with this project; We lose the farm if we are disallowed to continue with this project. It is for this reason that I did not commit the expense of this project to brick and mortar. If we are shut down, I will sell this mobile unit to someone outside of Wisconsin, where their state's ag department is not impeding access to smaller scale operations.

We are not new to OFS. We have been processing chickens on the farm for 25 years with an impeccable track record. Beef and pork are different, yes. But it is the same human-beings behind this project which have made all our past projects successful. Food safety is our personal responsibility. We don't get a second chance. Cut one corner and we're at risk. I've said this to myself 1000 times over the years, typically when I'm tired and I just want to get things done. We simply can't cut corners. We're not an employee. We're owners. The worries - and responses to those worries - fall exclusively on our shoulders. This - is what separates a family-owned and operated business from conventional employee-based establishments.

The Sleeping Elephant in the Room

While it seems evident that established full-time custom processors in our area will remain complacently inundated with business for at least the next few years, this complacency will eventually end as new brick and mortar establishments arrive to meet demand. Boom could very well lead to bust. If we are lucky enough to be allowed to function as a custom exempt OFS processor, providing processing exclusively to the informed, consenting end-consumers who will be purchasing their meats from our farm, our luck may soon run out once these established processors lose their seemingly infinite customer base.



I'll draw a parallel to what is known here in Wisconsin as the *Cookie Bill*. Here is a link to allow you to catch up on these details. <https://www.wisconsincottagefood.com/background>

If/when the custom processing backlog goes from boom to bust, the existing establishments will begin attacking other aspects which have captured market share. Wisconsin's DATCP is tied for last place in the country in respect to supporting Cottage Food businesses. 48 states have reasonable allowances for Cottage Foods. Wisconsin and New Jersey are the holdouts. Given Wisconsin's exponentially larger size compared to New Jersey, plus Wisconsin's status as a top agricultural state, clearly Wisconsin is functioning as the 50th most restrictive state in the union. What follows is the quotes taken from the Milwaukee Journal's reporting on April 26, 2017 as to why Wisconsin has yet to be liberated from these government shackles:

A quick history: with broad bipartisan support, this legislation, fondly referred to as the "Cookie Bill," has passed the state senate twice. But Assembly Speaker Robin Vos (R-Rochester) wouldn't schedule a vote either time in the state assembly, where it was likely to pass.

Vos issued this statement to CBS News explaining why he doesn't support the bill:

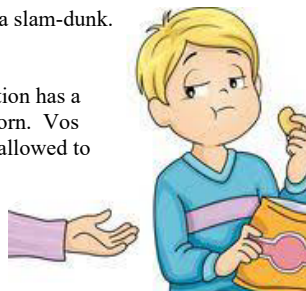
"As a small business owner, I appreciate the need to remove unnecessary regulations that don't protect public safety or the environment. While it's important that Wisconsin attracts new entrepreneurs, it should not be at the expense of our small businesses that are currently meeting the standards and regulations.

"The legislation that was proposed last session would have created an unequal playing field and undermine small businesses who make up nearly 98% of Wisconsin businesses, employing half of the workforce in our state." Vos owns his own small food business, Rojo's Popcorn. The Wisconsin Grocers Association also opposes the bill.

On the surface, Vos's response may appear as a slam-dunk. Here's why it is not.

First of all, the individual blocking this legislation has a vested interest in the outcome. Vos sells popcorn. Vos stands to lose market share if more people are allowed to sell popcorn. Dido for the Wisconsin Grocers Association.

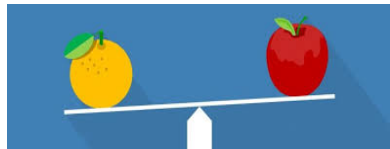
For the sake of argument, let's give this aspect a reprieve.



This argument of a level playing field makes logical sense, if and only if, the current regulated playing field is already level. In spite of a century of anti-trust laws existing on our country's books, congress - amidst a backdrop of apathetic citizenry - has largely ignored these laws. Agricultural production and processing (aka food products) represents some of the most monopolized aspects of our society. This consolidation and monopolization occurs from seed all the way through to the supermarket slotting fees amidst the ever-consolidating monopolization of supermarkets. The fact that we call them super-markets reveals this evolution. Every supermarket represents a consolidation of what was once perhaps a dozen small town mom and pop grocery stores. For some, this argument is easily extinguished by uttering the get-big-or-get-out mantra, as if to mandate that economies-of-scale override all collateral damage induced by these monopolizations. Simply saying this doesn't make it true. Drive through any town, any city, any rural area to witness the collateral damage of monopolization. Far too many business corners all now look the same. The business district in any town over 25,000 people all contains the same 10 or 20 corporate facades. Meanwhile, the smaller towns are barren. They must get their basic groceries from the local gas station or drive 25 miles to the closest city. Without a vibrant business tax base, their schools and sidewalks crumble. Economies-of-scale at this level doesn't necessarily block entry into the market. What economies-of-scale does is to pigeon-hole any aspiring entrant to compete at this same nationwide/worldwide level. Aspiring to be the next Elon Musk should not be the prerequisite to becoming an entrepreneurial job-creator.

Vos, as well as the many other bureaucrats who espouse the same doctrine of a one-size-fits-all set of regulations, are basing their assessment of "fairness" on an assumption. Vos assumes (conveniently) that all businesses producing popcorn and other foods are operating within the same market, and as such, must be held to the same standards.

In direct context to the Cottage Food concern, and certainly, to the similar parallel to OFS, this is far from being accurate. The small businesses associated with OFS and Cottage Foods are not asking for access to the supermarket or to compete with Robin Vos's online sales of food products. Cottage Food producers sell directly to the person standing right in front of them at their home or the local farmer's market here in Wisconsin. Farmer desiring to process their own farm meats desire to sell their product directly to the end customer. This consumer proactively sought out this farm, intent upon physically stepping foot on that very farm to retrieve the meats they very much desire.



It is prudent to remind Vos and others that espouse maintaining the alleged level playing field, that the tables can readily be turned. Relationship Marketing is considerably more expensive to manage than conventional, impersonal, retail sales. Relationship Marketing also requires a skill-set which many conventional retailers either don't possess, or prefer not to invoke. Every sale associated with Relationship Marketing is accompanied by personal interaction - often multiple times for each sale. This aspect is what makes the wheels go round. OFS farmers and Cottage Food providers are not demanding this same level of business transparency be imposed upon others in the "same" "fair" marketplace. There is no legal document mandating any particular level of access - or inaccess - which a consumer is privileged to receive from a provider. Consumers know a great deal more about the product they are buying when their feet are on the farm with eyes locked in conversation.

Consumers can't get this buying popcorn on the internet.

Ironically, the one-size-fits-all "standards and regulations" Speaker Vos espouses virtually assures unequal **access** to Wisconsin's playing field.

Summarizing: *All producers are not incompetent. All consumers are not stupid. Astute consumers will refrain from dealing with incompetent producers. Competent producers will refrain from dealing with stupid consumers. This is Relationship Marketing 101.*

The DATCP is not standing in front of public access to cigarettes nor alcohol. The DATCP is nowhere to be found in the potato chip or soda pop aisle. Yet all of these consumables represent a clear and present danger to our health. Outside of DATCP's purview yet parallel to this argument, lies the reality that it is perfectly legal to ride a motorcycle at 70 mph on I94 without a helmet, yet we can be arrested for selling a cookie or farm-processed meats to a customer who actively desires and seeks these products.

In this light, this is not an argument put forth with a tin-foil-hat, as so many would perceive. In Wisconsin, access to food processing - is clearly a racket.

Hybridizing the Hybrid - DIY Cut & Wrap

If you've read this far you recognize we're opening this season without the knowledge of established harvest dates. This is happening because we don't yet have a track record defining our capabilities. As a means of reducing the processing workload, I am offering the option of providing a freshly dressed carcass to those of you who have the skills or desire to do the cut and wrap yourself. Your expense would still include the cost associated with dressing and splitting. I am charging the same rate as we would all be paying if Detjens were still doing the OFS this season. The going rate is \$150 for beef, \$105 for pork. (I am seeing this rate exceed \$200 with a new OFS provider in Blue Mounds so I know were not out of line.) Yet anyone accepting this option will still avoid the expenses associated with cutting, wrapping, curing and smoking. I am reserving the right to limit this option, should it become excessively popular. However, if this option does prove popular, I will stock the farm accordingly in future seasons. We just devoted a year of our life to designing and building a beautiful OFS facility. I'd love to take the edge off the workload a bit but I also need to make certain we put this new facility to work.

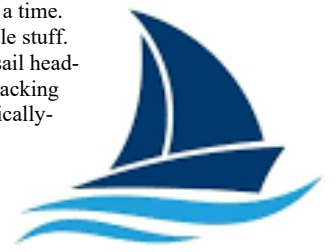


Shavings from the Homefront

Michelle and the kids are all doing fine. Now that Sarah, our youngest, has landed her career job as an RN in Madison, I'm feeling a certain incorrectness in referring to our adult children as "kids". Is there really ever a time in the life of parents when our adult children are no longer felt of as our kids? I suspect not. So "kids" is my storyline and I'm stickin' to it. Sheri and Bryan are doing well. While you may not have been introduced to Bryan, he has been at our farm helping out on pickup days from time-to-time. He's also helped load the truck in Watertown on those early Saturday morning's. They continue to raise heifers on their farm near Columbus, recently completing substantial renovations. At the same time, they are deep into a total restoration of the old farmstead they live on a few miles down the road from the big farm. They also have a beef herd, to which they too, are feeling the effects of the processing shortage. Their little girl Everly is now over 18 months, walking around like a pro, assuring she receives constant attention. Quite the chatterbox too! Richie and Ashlee are also doing well. They too, are putting a lot of sweat equity into their home makeover. Richie's work has kept him busy throughout all the ups and downs. Ashlee is holding down the fort at home, taking care of their son Logan. Logan - our second grandchild, is now about 14 months and growing like he's 18 months. He's not walking yet, but when he's standing against the couch, he's darn near as tall as his older cousin. As for myself, I've had my nose to the grindstone working on this processing project. Lots of domestic and farm projects have been pushed aside to this happen. Amidst the backdrop of peripheral world events, these extreme life changes feel surreal. I'm sure I'm not alone in this regard.

Meanwhile, we keep pushing on, one day at a time. We'll no doubt have to work through the little stuff. But one way or the other, we'll be ready to sail head-on into this new horizon. It's both nerve-wracking and exciting, all wrapped up in one hermetically-sealed package.

We hope you plan on setting sail with us. These Farm-to-Table ships... They don't sail well without lots of kindred spirits manning the Tables!



Thanks for reading. Hopeful for your continued support.

Steve



Navigating our Way through 2022

We're dealing with many new challenges this season.

What follows is a summary of how we plan to address the challenges associated with defining specific harvest dates.



Pastured Chicken Orders

Chickens are offered exclusively in June. We DO have firm dates available for chickens.

Dates: Thu 6/2 Sat 6/4 Tue 6/7 Thu 6/9 Sat 6/11 **Pickup Times:** Weekdays 4-5 pm Saturdays 1-2 pm

Beef and Pork Orders

General harvest timing will be similar to previous years. There *may* be just a few beef ready in July.

All remaining beef and pork harvests will begin in late August through late November (if needed that late).

At this time, we do not yet have firm harvest dates established.

In a Nutshell: We know *how* to get the job done. We don't yet know *how long* it will take us.

We are not comfortable assigning firm dates until we can tighten this up a bit.

Instead of asking you to sign up for a specific harvest date, we will initially be asking you to tell us the window (or windows) of time you are most likely to be available to pickup your order.

We realize some of your estimates may change as your schedule evolves. Simply update us if changes are needed.

(However... we'll need a firm commitment as we move closer to harvest times, as has always been the case.)

The Vision

Early in the season, we ask you for a list of dates which you feel are likely to be open for pickup. A bit later in the season we'll mutually narrow this down to something more specific. We'll then keep you updated as we begin processing your order. Once completed, your order will be staged and labeled in a freezer, most likely in the new barn. You simply arrive on the day you've signed up for to self-retrieve your order.

Please know that all of this may evolve but this is what we envision at this moment.

I have incorporated the harvest date questions directly into our new Cutting Instruction format. This format has been made via Google Forms, thus allowing you to view and send online. A separate link to these forms will be provided for both Beef and Pork. We would appreciate receiving your cutting instructions right away with your order this spring. (If you so choose, you can still change your instructions up until your harvest date.)

The vast majority of beef and pork will be processed directly at the farm in our new facility.

***However,** we did obtain reservations for 8 hogs for pickup in mid to late October **at Cedar Road Meats** near Iron Ridge.

Whereas anyone can request their pork for these limited openings, I will assign names based on seniority and proximity to this northerly location.

The Hardest News

We are not certain we can bring everyone from 2021 back on the schedule for 2022. We simply just don't yet know our potential. We've created a seniority list as we feel this is the fairest way to handle this. My evaluation of seniority tells me the cutoff *might* be 2016.

At the same time, we don't yet know which people from 2021 will be placing an order in 2022.

For this reason, we are sending out notices exclusively to *everyone* who participated in 2021.

To paraphrase: If you received this mail directly from me, place your order. I'll sort it out once I've received all the orders.

"If" everyone places an order similar to 2021, we will likely need to use the seniority list to match volume to our potential.

We realize this will leave some people hanging as they wait to learn our potential.

Amidst this first season of substantial change, I'm afraid I have been unable to find a way around this.

The only way we'll know is once we've established at least a short track record.

We will do our best in communicating our status as soon as we possibly can.

Please email your order to solarharvestfarm@yahoo.com

You will recognize some redundancy exists between email ordering and questions asked within the online cutting instructions links. I'm testing the potential of integrating this information in one online form. Like everything else this season, I'll know more after we've had a chance to work through it.

When providing your estimated pickup options, let's start out working with the unit of a "full week".

In other words: *I expect to be available during the 2nd full week of September and the 1st and 3rd full weeks of October.*

You're not committing to every day of that week. Just an estimate that you're likely available at least a few days that week.

Example Order

15 Chickens June 2nd

Quarter Beef Half Pork

My anticipated availability for pickup: 2nd full week of Sept; 1st and 3rd full weeks of October.

My phone number is ____ - ____ - ____

Why the uncertainty with timing? Once the harvest starts, a rather inflexible need exists to maintain the same pulse. The variables between beef and pork are quite different yet must be integrated. Labor hours and equipment/processing capacities have been identified and balanced. This balance must be maintained from harvest date through aging, cutting, curing, smoking, wrapping and freezing. Our freezer capacities must pulse with in this cycle. If we fail to properly manage pickup timing, freezers will fill to capacity, effectively curtailing all subsequent harvests. All other aspects of this build have been successfully adapted to our seasonal scale. The cost to install and operate a walk-in freezer with the luxury of overflow capacity can only be justified when levied against much greater utilization. Being small has many advantages. This aspect represents one of the disadvantages. We will have some overflow capacity. Everything always looks great on paper. Once we've tested these cycle times and capacities against reality, we'll have the ability to button-down pickup timing in advance. Expecting this to be an uncertainty inherent only to this first season.

