

Project Protein Final Report

In 2014 Interfaith Food Bank Society of Lethbridge received approval and funding from the Community Initiatives Program offered through Alberta Culture to develop a Pilot Project to encourage donors from the livestock industry to donate animals for processing into ground beef and pork for food bank families. As we have reached completion of the pilot project, we are writing to provide a Final Report on the program and to inform you of our progress, findings, and future of the program.

A BRIEF HISTORY OF PROJECT PROTEIN

Lack of adequate protein has been identified by all food banks in Southern Alberta. Meat is often expensive and donations of fresh or frozen meat are rare. Food banks work to ensure families accessing services are provided with adequate quantities of protein.

In June 2014, we hired a part-time project coordinator to develop the program model and communications plan for the pilot project, which we hope to pass along to other communities upon completion. Project Protein officially launched in July 2014 with four participating abattoirs and 6 participating food banks. In September 2014, we were pleased to have MNP join the program as a Platinum Sponsor and we continued to recruit livestock donations and financial contributions to help us sustain the program once the initial grant funding was depleted.

Industry has been very supportive of the initiative, and we were invited to attend many industry conferences, conventions and trade shows. Promotional materials have been developed, and we have been able to show success in the program model – animals are being donated, processed and meat distributed to food banks, and tax receipts are being generated to the producers for their donations.

Initial grant funds were to be depleted by the end of June 2015, however, as we had not spent all available funds on processing, we applied, and were approved for an extension of the project until February 28, 2016. We have now filed our final report to close off our requirements for the grant funding, and have polled participants of the pilot project to gather feedback on the program to identify what worked well, what didn't, and how the project might be improved should it be expanded in the future.

PROGRAM MODEL

The goal of the project was to prove the concept and show success within a well-defined service area. We also wanted to develop all the necessary components to make it replicable and sustainable for food banks in other regions as well. In essence, we hope to prove if food banks had access to processing funds, animals would be donated by livestock producers, and protein would be increased for food bank families.

The program model did prove successful and manageable for all parties involved: Interfaith Food Bank, other food banks, participating abattoirs, and donors. Donors contacted an abattoir of their choice and booked an appointment to have the animal processed into 2 pound units of ground meat. Once the meat was processed, the abattoir contacted Interfaith Food Bank and we transported the meat to our facility. We recorded the donation, and stored it until the recipient food bank picked it up. Thank you letters and charitable tax receipts were sent to the donor on behalf of Project Protein through Interfaith Food Bank.

As long as food banks have access to processing funds, all other concepts of the project can be absorbed into existing food bank operations, as food banks are able to accept and distribute inspected meat, and if they have charitable status, they are able to receipt gifts in kind at fair market value.

ISSUES/CHALLENGES

Throughout the pilot project, we encountered issues and challenges that had to be overcome as we worked to fine-tune the program model and to educate food banks, donors, industry and the general public about the pilot project.

Sustaining the Program:

The biggest challenge we came across with the project was the marketing and sponsorship recruitment to offset costs of processing fees and to maintain long-term sustainability. While we were able to secure a platinum sponsor for 1 year of the pilot, and were also able to recruit several financial donations, we found it difficult to secure on-going funding for the project simply due to the fact that we were operating a “pilot”. We found that it would be much easier for individual food banks to recruit donors/sponsors to secure ongoing processing funds than it was for Interfaith to recruit this type of support for six participating food banks. We also found that the small area we were operating from limited partnerships with larger organizations, whereas a provincial or national program might offer more options to larger sponsors simply due to reach and/or marketing capacity.

Food Bank Capacity:

Interfaith Food Bank absorbed all program development, program administration and coordination of donations which proved to be more labour intensive than expected. At the beginning of the project, we also experienced the spread of some misinformation that confused the process for producers, and we also experienced some difficulty in the perception of acting on behalf of more than one food bank. We spent a lot of time “trouble shooting” as people had been waiting for quite some time for the program to begin, and had some preconceived ideas of how it would be run. Once the program development and marketing materials were complete and distributed to participating food banks and abattoirs, however, we were able to alleviate some of these concerns, and the program was easily incorporated into regular food bank operations.

Now that the pilot project is complete, Interfaith Food Bank will continue the program independently and encourages other participating food banks to do so as well. Unfortunately, however, Interfaith is no longer able to absorb the resources associated with administering the program on behalf of all of the other recipient food banks.

Shoot and Bleeds:

Donations would be increased dramatically if the program was able to accept “Shoot and Bleed” animals (those animals that may have become injured or unable to “walk” to the abattoir as was stipulated by the pilot project). It became blatantly clear that producers would prefer to offer such animals to the program, which are often a better quality of meat, and available in quantity. Food banks would be happy to accept these animals as well, but current parameters restricted our ability to include them, specifically due to concerns for animal welfare, and also due to concerns that producers might use the program as a “dumping ground” for animals that do not meet industry standards. As we worked very closely with Alberta Agriculture to secure the grant funding for the project, we felt the need to comply with their wishes in accepting only animals that could walk to the abattoir. We would recommend that in the future, food banks and Alberta Agriculture might work towards developing a system by which these animals could somehow be safely, and humanely included in programs such as Project Protein.

It is important to note that throughout the entire 18 month pilot project, we only received one animal that did not pass inspection, and we had no issue recouping condemnation and disposal fees from the donor. We found that donors supported the project to help food banks, not for the disposal of unwanted or unsafe animals.

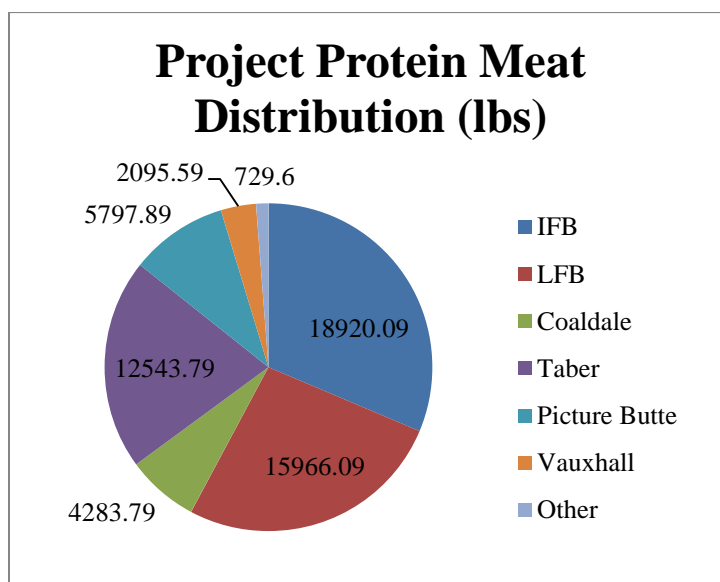
FINAL OUTCOMES

We have now completed the grant funded Project Protein pilot project and were able to show success in our model for accepting livestock to be ground into protein for food bank distribution. The pilot program recruited 84 beef and 46 pork (for a total of 130 animals); issued over \$167,000 in charitable tax receipts to donors; and provided food banks with more than 39,000 pounds of ground beef for food bank families. All of these figures exceeded budget expectations in the grant application.

While grant funds have been depleted, all of the participating food banks have chosen to continue the program independently, and most abattoirs are continuing to honor discounted pricing for processing animals donated to food banks.

The amount of meat received by recipient food banks was impacted by two factors: the ability to recruit animals, and the ability to store and/or distribute the meat. Larger food banks with the ability to accept and distribute more meat received the bulk of the meat from the pilot project, and smaller food banks often shared animals with other recipient food banks simply because they did not need all of the meat that was offered to them. In all cases, donor intent was honored as to which food bank would receive the meat from their donated animals.

The following chart indicates the distribution of meat to the participating food banks during the pilot program.



We have collected feedback from all stakeholders who participated with the project, including participating abattoirs, recipient food banks, and donors. Recurring themes identified in the post-pilot survey indicate:

- Program was a great way to utilize animals that have little commercial value but a lot of nutritional value.
- Food Banks increased the amount of protein they are able to distribute to food bank families.
- Program model was simple and ran smoothly for everyone involved.
- Charitable tax receipts were an incentive for donors to contribute to the program, and the program model did not require a cash donation for the processing.
- All respondents stated they would like to see the program continue.

NEXT STEPS

Since expenditure of grant funds, Interfaith Food Bank is no longer able to cover processing costs on behalf of other food banks. However, all six of the recipient food banks from the pilot project will continue the project independently, building upon relationships established with donors and abattoirs through Project Protein. Most of the participating abattoirs will continue to offer food banks discounted pricing for processing animals.

The process of accepting, processing and receipting animals will not change much at all - donors will simply deal directly with their food bank of choice, and the recipient food bank will make necessary arrangements with abattoirs. Recipient food banks will cover processing costs, and will issue receipts to donors directly. As always, food banks will continue to work together to share resources and support families in need in their communities.

We have reviewed the pilot project with Alberta Food Banks, the provincial association of food banks, to inquire as to whether they would like to explore the option of assuming the project model for implementation to food banks across the province. Alberta Food Banks will need to explore whether this is a service they would like to provide to member food banks, and if so, how they will fund and structure such a program. Interfaith Food Bank will provide all of the information we acquired through the pilot, as well as the communications plan, promotional materials and program model for food banks to implement the program in their own communities. Should the provincial association choose to expand and continue the program, we expect an announcement as to their plans, and will share that information with our program participants.

It is our hope that industry leaders, provincial decision makers, and our network of food banks can continue this program at a larger scale in the future, and envision this pilot program as the driver to fundamentally improve the health and wellness of food bank clients in Alberta, and beyond.

If you have questions, concerns, or would like more information, please connect with Thressa Bens at thressa@interfaithfoodbank.ca or by calling 403-320-8779.