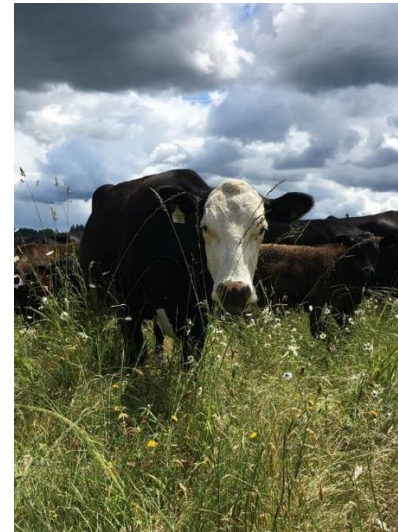


# Thurston County Agriculture and Meat Processing Workforce Support and Recovery Proposal

**18 January 2022**

## **Project Development Partners**

- Aslan Meade, Thurston Economic Development Council
- Sarah Moorehead, Thurston Conservation District
- Yvonne Ryneerson, Northwest Agriculture Business Center
- Micha Ide, Pierce Fresh and livestock producer
- Stephen Bramwell, WSU Extension Thurston County
- Rene Skaggs, Pierce County Conservation District



*The following proposal resulted from a series of meetings held between October 2021 and January 2022 with livestock producers, meat processors, and agriculture and meat processing technical service organizations.*

## **Project Proposal Summary**

Thurston County farmers are experiencing disruptions related to the COVID-19 pandemic. Impacts to the meat processing industry and impacts to labor supply have emerged as two prevailing challenges facing farmers and the agriculture industry. Market disruption and supply chain issues are being addressed through recently launched American Rescue Plan Act-funded Thurston food system grants and related programs.

To address outstanding labor and meat industry problems, a group of several agriculture resource partners and farmers met from early October 2021 through mid-January 2022 to discuss strategies to alleviate impacts to the meat processing industry. This work group included representatives from the Thurston Economic Development Council, Thurston Conservation District, WSU Extension, Pac Mountain Workforce Development, Northwest Agriculture Business Center, Pierce County Fresh, and the Pierce Conservation District.

The current proposal addresses top problems facing agriculture in Thurston County and the greater region:

1. Labor shortages in agriculture generally
2. Labor shortages in the meat processing industry specifically
3. Disruptions in meat processing due to labor and infrastructure disruptions

The program proposed here will 1) help recruit and retain agricultural workers through outreach and marketing, training, wage premiums, industry support and networking, and strategic cultivation of the local food value proposition for workers in this region, and 2) match funding allocated by Pierce County to complete an assessment of meat processing infrastructure in the region and generate proposals to address infrastructure issues.

## Situation – COVID-19 Impacts on Agriculture in Thurston County

In 2021 and early 2022, disruptions to the agriculture and meat processing sectors due to COVID-19 were evaluated through a survey and series of listening sessions with farmers, technical service organizations, and initial outreach to meat processors. Outreach results are summarized in Box 1.

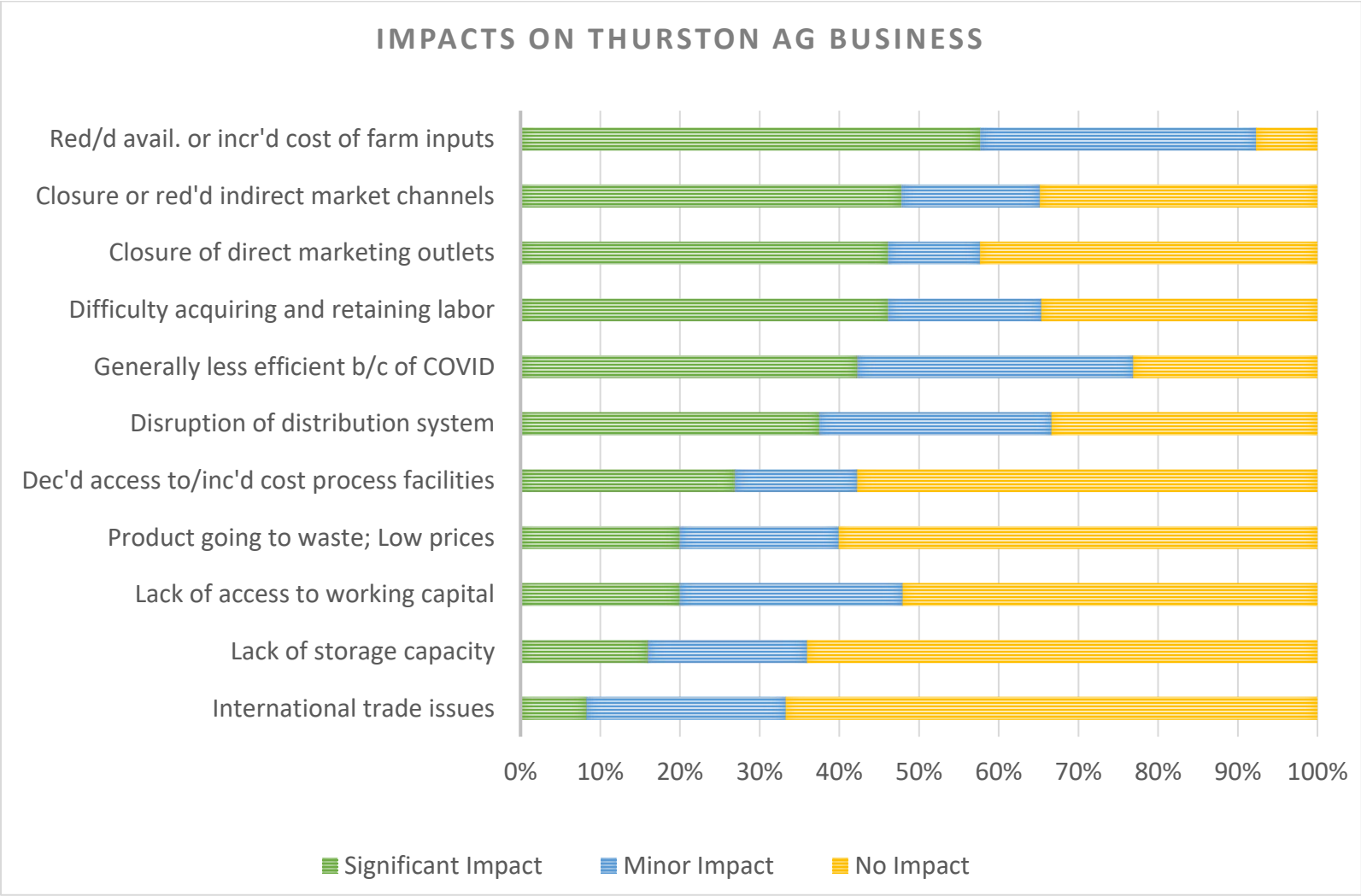
Thurston County-specific COVID-19 disruptions obtained through survey work in late summer 2021 are summarized below and in Figure 1. Three pressing impacts are noted here:

- Among Thurston County farmers, difficulty acquiring and retaining labor is the second highest ranking *significant* negative impact of COVID-19 (behind reduced availability or increased cost of farm inputs)
- 46% of Thurston County farmers are having *significant* difficulty acquiring and retaining labor
- 27% of Thurston County farmers are experiencing significant impact regarding decreased access to or increased costs of using regional processing facilities

### Box 1. Industry, Farm and Meat Processor Input: Labor and infrastructure impacts of COVID-19

- Aging processing business owner population – imminent loss of processors with no succession planning. Several operators have not fully recovered or who have died from COVID
- On-farm processing and slaughter operations/capacity is strained (mobile facilities are expensive to operate, maintain and difficult to deal with rotating-site processing regulations and permits).
- Long-scheduling bottlenecks for any processing- in the SW its 1.5-2 years out for beef.
- Processor operations having a hard time with staffing/labor - limited applicants, retention, or having the capacity to train.
- Infrastructure issues, staff needs, and producer pricing caps 'bottleneck each other' (concurrent expansion needed).
- Staffing is the most complex barrier - needs customized technical assistance for development and implementation.
- Workforce Development agency collaboration is needed with regional model.
- Processing shops that pay a living wage with high-quality workplace culture must increase costs - prices small and low-margin producers out
- Butcher shops interviewed would be reluctant to expand capacity without the labor pool - especially if expansion is funded through loans or other incurred debt. Too risky.
- Trust building is needed to connect butcher shops to funding support.
- Local custom butcher shops are full, can't handle more animals.
- For some producers, markets don't offer higher margins for USDA processing so custom exempt is where they make more money.
- Shortage of CDL truckers to move animals and operate mobile units.
- Most facilities need some form of large upgrade/ funding influx to increase capacity.

**Figure 1. Impacts of COVID-19 on Thurston Agriculture Businesses**



## **Project Goals**

1. Provide immediate relief to economic harm to the agriculture and meat processing industry caused by labor shortages through:
  - Recruitment using targeted outreach, marketing, branding improvements, and other messaging tools
  - Retention by providing incentives, program support, apprentice and employer training, leadership training, and business networking support
  - Access to cost-reimbursed continuing education coursework in leadership, farming, and meat cutting using existing available curriculum whether online or in-person
  
2. Identify immediate opportunity for reducing meat processing bottlenecks by:
  - Assessment of current processing capacity and needs by matching Pierce County financial support for a meat processing facility feasibility assessment
  - Mobilizing the results of the meat processing needs evaluation through targeted short-term funding opportunities that are imminently available through the Washington State Department of Agriculture, United States Department of Agriculture, and other funding opportunities

## Project Concept

The concept of this workforce response proposal is to provide seed funding to establish a regional agriculture and meat processing sector apprenticeship program. Thurston County funding would provide funds to initiate this program that would develop a regional and even statewide reach in subsequent years.

The program would initially fund an agriculture labor workforce development *program lead* (hereafter referred to as “program coordinator”) who would work closely with regional Workforce Development councils. The “seed program” would operate through 2024 with funding through an ARPA allocation in Thurston County. *The program coordinator would bring industry-specific skills for training and placing apprentices, supporting employers, and overall program coordination. PacMtn Workforce Development Council will be a critical partner, and would provide support in workforce onboarding, retraining collaboration, and related tasks.*

Functionally, funding will support the program coordinator and provide a budget to successfully recruit, train, and retain motivated agricultural workers, thereby alleviating labor shortages in agriculture generally and meat processing specifically. The budget will provide resources from 2022 through 2024 to deploy marketing and outreach/communication tools, facilitate tuition-paid training, and offer professional development/continuing education opportunities for workers. The program coordinator would be housed with a local technical service providers (WSU Extension or Thurston Conservation District) and overseen by a steering committee with representation from farmers, farm research and education agencies, and workforce development entities (see Organizational Structure, below).

### Critical Features of this Program Concept:

- ***Don't recreate the wheel.*** The program will leverage existing resources and partnerships, such as with available meat processing apprenticeships, online training resources, ag job marketing networks, and regional workforce development councils/organizations
- ***Develop individualized learning plans.*** The program coordinator will work with job placement sites and program participants to develop tailored training and placement plans that meet professional development needs and aspirations of each trainee.
- ***Focus on leadership and sustainable career paths.*** Retention and industry viability rely on growing new leaders within the agriculture sector, whether farm businesses, or owners of meat processing shops. The program will help

increase the value proposition and value to trainees and mentors by supporting leadership training, and apply pay premiums, job titles, and certifications as compensation for these trainings. This funding proposal provides seed money to start the program, and other funds will be sought to continue the program and/or broaden it for a regional focus.

- ***Industry branding and value.*** By directly facilitating innovative job marketing, relationships, business-to-business networking, and direct one-on-one support, the program seeks to make the agriculture and meat processing sectors desirable places to work, and help the upcoming workforce feel passionate about what they do. This includes necessary cultural changes and leadership development regarding best employment management practices, gender equity, and focus on diversity, equity, and inclusion in the agriculture and meat processing industries.

## Program Activities

<b>Recruitment</b>		
Core activities	Additional activities	Partner organizations
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Hire a program coordinator to recruit, place, and support new hires</li> <li>• Support the value proposition for local ag and processing jobs, storytelling, industry branding</li> <li>• Utilize existing job posting resources</li> <li>• Monitor job boards</li> <li>• Evaluate applicants</li> <li>• HR support / Compliance assurance to programs, etc</li> <li>• Bilingual, ESL support; DEI strategies</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Career coaching, resume building, other</li> <li>• Write/advertise job posts</li> <li>• Coordinate secondary certifications</li> <li>• Legal compliance</li> <li>• Attend job fairs</li> <li>• Online recruitment platform</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Thurston Co farms</li> <li>• Thurston Co meat processors</li> <li>• Pac Mountain Workforce Development, other WFD partners</li> <li>• Eat Local First – utilize and expand job board of existing networking organization</li> <li>• Washington State Job Board for Ag</li> <li>• WorksourceWA.com</li> </ul>
<b>Placement</b>		
Core activities	Additional activities	Partner organizations
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Maintain farm/meat processor employer listings</li> <li>• Site placement review; employer needs assessment</li> <li>• Apprentice review; skill needs and capabilities assessment</li> <li>• Tailed training plan development</li> <li>• Hiring events, apprentice site search support</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Site criteria and vetting</li> <li>• Employer and apprentice goal-setting</li> <li>• Generate and maintain value-proposition for employers<sup>1</sup></li> <li>• Build connections to workforce pipelines</li> <li>• Employer workshops, apprentice workshops</li> <li>• Succession planning assistance</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Thurston Co farms</li> <li>• Thurston Co regional meat processors</li> <li>• Pac Mountain Workforce Development, other WFD partners</li> <li>• NW Meat Processors Association</li> </ul>
<b>Retention</b>		
Core activities	Additional activities	Partner organizations
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Tailored training program development and support</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Employer networking events</li> <li>• Apprentice networking events</li> <li>• Business networking support</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Thurston Co farms</li> <li>• Thurston Co regional meat processors</li> </ul>

<sup>1</sup> A goal of this program to provide a value-proposition to the employers too; raise the value for all participants. Employer value may be generated through succession planning assistance; addressing concerns around apprenticeships not investing in the business (learn and move on), and; support with transitions including purchasing a shop to get the apprentice invested, among other options

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• On-the-job training and training cost offsets</li> <li>• Employer training (talent retention, management, other)</li> <li>• Job coaching<sup>2</sup></li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Webinars, workshops, community building</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Pac Mountain Workforce Development, other WFD partners</li> </ul>
<b>Education/Curriculum</b>		
<b>Core activities</b>	<b>Additional activities</b>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Track standards for completion</li> <li>• Training cost reimbursement</li> <li>• Annual programming budget – development and compliance</li> <li>• Coordinate workshops, webinars, other education offerings</li> <li>• Track deliverables and program outcomes</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Complete reporting and oversight requirements</li> <li>• Compliance to state, local and federal requirements. L&amp;I, etc</li> <li>• Support certifications acquisition/ requirements</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Northwest Meat Processors Association</li> <li>• Seattle Puget Sound Meat Cutters Program</li> <li>• WSU Extension Animal Science</li> <li>• Range Meat Academy</li> <li>• Illinois Meat Academy</li> <li>• South Seattle College Meat Cutting/Meat Cutter School</li> <li>• Niche Meat Processors Assistance Network</li> <li>• ATTRA (Internship Curriculum Handbook)</li> </ul>
<b>Job site support, training, vetting, compliance</b>		
<b>Core activities</b>	<b>Additional activities</b>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Employer training and networking</li> <li>• Apprentice training and networking</li> <li>• HR policy, procedure, compliance and oversight</li> <li>• DEI and ESL support</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Facilitation/conflict resolution process</li> <li>• Intellectual property and private ownership concerns?</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Labor and Industries</li> <li>• Workforce Development</li> </ul>

<sup>2</sup> Additional job coaching support for apprentices provided by the Program Coordinator should connecting the apprentice to relevant resources, such as: Directing participants to business development support programs, like Scale Up through Thurston EDC WSU Extension Whole Farm Planning and Agricultural Entrepreneurship, Enterprise for Equity Trainings, other); Awareness of business and lending resources for small business start-up, Enterprise for Equity, other; Ag business cooperative development support through Northwest Agriculture Business Center; Land access resources, like Thurston Conservation District Farmlink program, and; Generally connecting apprentices to businesses of interest.

### **Resources and Tools for the Program Coordinator**

Program funding will provide the agriculture labor workforce development program lead (hereafter referred to as “program coordinator”) with a budget to support labor recruitment and retention (see Preliminary Budget). The program coordinator will use these resources to effectively serve as a job placement, training, and retention specialist.

### **Organizational Structure**

A specifically agriculture technical service agency (WSU Extension in Thurston County or the Thurston Conservation District) will serve as the employer or record for the apprenticeship program coordinator.

An Advisory Board will guide continued program design and implementation, as well as oversight during program operation. The steering committee will advertise, recruit, and manage the selection process for the program coordinator. During program operation the Advisory Board will meet regularly with the program coordinator and partner organizations to provide strategic guidance and input. Representatives from at least the following organizations will be provided seats on the Advisory Board: Thurston County, WSU Thurston County Extension, Thurston EDC, the Northwest Agriculture Business Center, Thurston Conservation District, Pierce Conservation District, Pierce Fresh, PacMtn Workforce Development, Washington State Dept. of Agriculture (or designee on Washington Meat Up), at least one livestock producer, and one meat processor.

### **Relationship to Long-range Agriculture Labor Support Funding and Stewardship**

This apprenticeship program will begin in Thurston County, and ultimately the goal of this work is to design a Western Washington or perhaps statewide program. The initial implementation of this work in Thurston County is a pilot project, funded by Thurston County from 2022 through 2024. Once operational, it is envisioned that this program will transition to being housed by another host organization such as the WSDA and serve the Washington State as a whole.

### Preliminary Budget<sup>†</sup> for Program Coordinator, Resources, and Tools<sup>3</sup>

Program coordinator salary (3 yrs, 12-mo, 1 FTE, \$4,583/mo)		\$ 223,654
Program coordinator benefits (30.3%)		\$ 51,978
Hourly premium for completing leadership training (like a stipend but linked to training completion, and added as an hourly wage increase to existing farm/butcher pay rate)		\$ 200,000
Advertising budget		\$ 50,000
Training for apprentices/apprentices		\$ 100,000
NWMPA (they reimburse tuition checklist with placement; need help with marketing)		
Training for employers		\$ 50,000
Housing support/placement		\$ 25,000
A non-profit partnership may be most appropriate in this area of activity due to liability associated with a public entity being involved in housing placement		
Employer funding support to meet baseline site requirements?		\$ 50,000
Tuition-specific costs, stipends, reimbursements		\$ 200,000
Meat processing infrastructure processing capacity and needs assessment (match Pierce County)		\$ 35,000
<b>Total</b>		<b>\$ 985,632</b>

<sup>†</sup>Budget figures provided are estimates for purposes of illustrated program concept. Budget justifications would need to be developed integrating projected costs that take into account specific data such as target number of program participants, wage premium calculations, curriculum tuition rates (i.e. Range Academy “Meat Cutter” training: <https://rangepartners.com/range-meat-cutter-online-certificate/>), and similar data for each projected cost line item

<sup>3</sup> Strategies are needed with these budget line items (for example, a marketing plan to direct the marketing budget)

### Long-term funding/fiscal self-sufficiency goals

- Support long-range industry goals
- Support long-range industry salary goals
- Capacity building for the industry
- Capacity building for processing facilities. Loans and business development support.
- Capacity building for the meat producers. Loans, grants and business development support.
- Provide referral services
- ESL; DEI strategies and support
- Consumer education
- Succession planning assistance for meat processors
- Support land and business acquisition
- Provide business networking and mentorship
- Coordinate housing support

### Professional Training and Program Development Partner Organizations

Seattle Puget Sound Meat Cutters Program	<a href="https://www.ufcw21.org/meat">https://www.ufcw21.org/meat</a>
South Seattle College Meat Cutting/Meat Cutter School	<a href="https://tradecollege.org/colleges/seattle-community-college-south-campus/personal-and-culinary-services/culinary-arts/meat-cutting/">https://tradecollege.org/colleges/seattle-community-college-south-campus/personal-and-culinary-services/culinary-arts/meat-cutting/</a>
Feasibility studies, Niche Meat Processors Assistance Network.	<a href="https://www.nichemeatprocessing.org/">https://www.nichemeatprocessing.org/</a>
UFCW Meat Cutters Apprenticeship Program	<a href="https://www.ufcw.org/apprenticeship/">https://www.ufcw.org/apprenticeship/</a>
Range Meat Academy	<a href="https://rangepartners.com/range-meat-academy/">https://rangepartners.com/range-meat-academy/</a>
Northwest Meat Processors Association	<a href="https://www.nwmpa.com/">https://www.nwmpa.com/</a>
WSU Animal Science Program	<a href="https://ansci.wsu.edu/">https://ansci.wsu.edu/</a>

### Follow-on Topics

- Determine costs to leveraging existing resources. Fees for trainings, speakers, materials.
- Marketing and branding strategy