

Agriculture TODAY

Freeport Farmer Nominated for National 'No Boundaries' Beef Industry Vision Award

The award was established to recognize innovative individuals in the beef industry who have excelled in implementing visionary business management practices.

Erick Jensen of Wolfe's Neck Farm in Freeport is one of three individuals across the nation being considered for a prestigious national award given annually to an individual who has demonstrated innovation in their cattle operation or beef business and serves as an example to others to follow. The award is sponsored by the Ford Motor Company and will be presented by the National Cattlemen's Foundation, a not-for-profit organization whose mission is to promote the future of the beef industry through research and education. The national winner will be named during the 2004 Cattle Industry Convention and Trade Show, January 28-31 in Phoenix, Arizona.

The award was established to recognize innovative individuals in the beef industry who have excelled in implementing visionary business management practices and who are looking five years into the future. Nominees are evaluated on the basis of effective use of technology, impact on profitability, ingenuity of implementation, impact on the industry, and optimum resource management. The two other nominees for the award are Painted Hills Natural Beef of Fossil, Oregon and Henry Gardiner of Gardiner Angus Ranch in Ashland, Kansas.

Wolfe's Neck Farm began shipping natural beef only two years ago and has established a solid foothold in the retail meat case in a remarkably short two-year period. Wolfe's Neck Farm Natural Beef can be purchased from the tip of northern Maine, west to Ohio, and south to Florida. Consumers are buying it at 150 outlets in the northeast including 110 Hannaford stores in New England, 23 Bread & Circus Whole Foods stores, and many natural food stores. Fifty stores in New York and Vermont went on-line in August as part of an expansion plan initiated by Hannaford's corporate meat department.

Two fast-paced years have gone by since that first shipment of four beef animals. Now, 120 head per week are shipped. The brand hit the market when consumer demand for natural product was surging upward. Consumers want locally-raised foods. They want fresh, not frozen beef. They're tired of finding natural beef out-of-stock and want to buy it along with staples and produce. They *really* like the flavor and tenderness of the USDA Choice beef.

"In sixteen months, we've seen a 400% growth in our retail sales," Jensen says.

The WNF program is significantly impacting the economics of beef production and farming in Maine. "Putting this into perspective, each animal supplies about 400 pounds of beef. At 100 head, the volume of beef sold every week is 40,000 pounds," Jensen says. Cattle come from farms all over Maine and beyond and are finished in Maine, Vermont, and Pennsylvania. "Over 50 small cow/calf producers supply into the feedlots," he explains. Raising calves to WNF specifications means producers earn a premium over commodity price. "Last fall cow/calf producers received an additional \$90 per calf, and feeders received an additional \$25/head. For every animal going through the program, data shows nearly \$130 per head in extra income for the operation, which benefits the economy of the state." As he projects cattle requirements to meet program expansion, Jensen anticipates needing 5,000 head over the next year, and he anticipates 2003 gross revenue at \$4 million.

"When producers see profits like this, the model becomes sustainable," states John Rebar, Associate Director of the Maine Agriculture Center at the University of Maine. Rebar is one of several Extension professionals who

believes the WNF program is reviving farming in Maine. Strong support comes from the Maine Department of Agriculture. Such broad commitment from Extension, the State Department of Agriculture, Hannaford, Bread & Circus, distributors and packers is strategically significant for the success of Wolfe's Neck Farm and its producer-partners. Wolfe's Neck Farm is stimulating production, providing markets for local agriculture, giving consumers what they're looking for, and instilling new hope to farming in Maine. Jensen is providing the vision and management that's behind this venture. His success is being seen at the national level.
