

As featured in National Cattlemen Magazine

Summer 2004

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Englewood, CO 80155

Wolfe's Neck Farm Creates Program to Revitalize Northeast Beef Industry by: WALT BARNHART

Maine would seem to be just about as far from cow country as you can get. But to the farmers who raise beef cattle there, it's as significant to beef production as anywhere else in the United States. And staying viable and profitable is just as important.

Keeping cattle production viable to current and future farmers raising cattle in Maine and nearby states has led to an effort to revitalize the industry there. Innovation mixed with tradition has been the key.

Wolfe's Neck Farm, a non-profit educational and demonstration farm in Freeport, Maine, has been raising natural beef since the 1950's. Just over two years ago the farm created a cooperative that helps local farmer producers capitalize on its practices as well as its proximity to major metropolitan consumer markets in the Northeast. For its efforts, Wolfe's Neck Farm was one of three finalists for the 2004 Vision Award, presented by the Ford Motor Company.

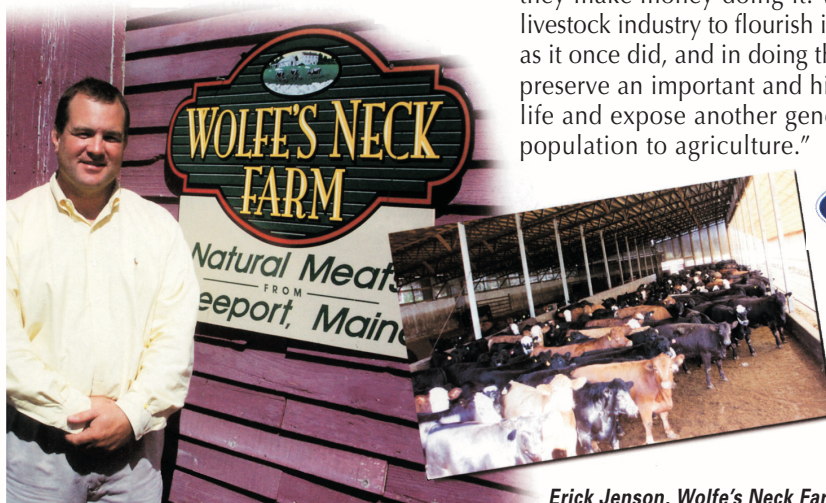
The result has been a sincere determination to succeed while maintaining a way of life.

"New England is losing its rural character," says Wolfe's Neck Natural Beef Chief Executive Officer Erick Jensen. "Livestock producers struggle to survive, and in most cases end generations of production as development engulfs the farms. Farmers and ranchers don't typically want to sell but are

forced to because of not having the ability to make an acceptable living."

By forming its program in 2002, Wolfe's Neck sought to break that sequence. Over a three year period a feasibility study was undertaken to see if producers and a northeastern packer could take a branded product to market. Now more than 100 producers supply the Wolfe's Neck program with a product that is distributed to more than 250 company and independent stores.

In its first 20 months the program went from shipping 40 head a month to more than 100 per week. Sales exceeded \$4 million in 2003, and growth is anticipated at 80 percent for 2004.



Erick Jensen, Wolfe's Neck Farm President/CEO

More importantly, producers in the program receive a 5-20 percent premium over commodity prices for the animals they raise. It's estimated that during its first 20 months the program contributed an additional \$650,000 above the conventional market into the livestock industry in the Northeast.

"With this extra money and the potential for a viable market, beef producers are once again looking to expand," says Jensen. "Re-investment is taking place and the next generation is considering staying on the farm."

What Wolfe's Neck Farm has done is not necessarily novel to other parts of the country. Companies focusing on all natural products are popping up everywhere. But what they have, done for producers in the Northeast is take a cooperative approach to business and make it work for participating producers, who have significant input to a program that returns to them premiums that allow expansion to their operations.

Added value to targeted customers in the form of natural beef from local operations gives these producers a leg up on larger competitors. The program's added benefit is that it provides production and marketing education to participating producers - especially how the various segments of the industry work together to make things work.

"We want our producers to understand the ramifications of a good product or poor product," according to Jensen. "We also want a complete understanding of the different challenges each segment of the industry faces, from the purebred producer all the way to the consumer.

"Finally, and most importantly, we want producers who listen to the consumer and produce the product they want to buy, while they make money doing it. We want the livestock industry to flourish in the Northeast as it once did, and in doing this we can help preserve an important and historical way of life and expose another generation of the population to agriculture."



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