



## Farm to School Sales: Profiles of Ranches Making It Work

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An increasing number of schools across the United States are buying local foods to serve in their cafeterias. For farmers and ranchers, schools present a new market channel for their products, provided they are prepared to raise and process their crops or livestock to meet the schools' needs and specifications. This publication profiles two Montana ranches that have successfully sold their beef into area schools. It outlines some of challenges of producing, processing, and selling to schools, as well as the featured ranches' business models, equipment needs, and the ranchers' perceptions of farm to school sales in the future.

### Contents

- Producers' Role in Farm to School ..... 1
- Two Stories Worth the Telling ..... 2
- Beef to School at Bear Paw Meats ..... 2
- Beef to School at Lazy SR Ranch ..... 6
- Conclusion ..... 9
- References ..... 9
- Further Resources ..... 9
- Acknowledgments ..... 10



Photo: NCAT

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### Producers' Role in Farm to School

**F**arm to school programs are gaining momentum and the relationship between producers and schools is becoming ever more important. As of 2014, 42% of U.S. schools participated in farm to school programs. That's over 42,500 schools, compared to just two schools in 1996, the year deemed as the start of farm to school movement (National Farm to School Network, 2017; Becot et al., 2017). In recent years, farm to school has become more mainstream.

But what exactly is farm to school? Quite simply, farm to school incorporates three elements: local food procurement, agriculture or food education, and hands-on gardening. By implementing one or a combination of these three elements, schools are engaging not only students, but also teachers, producers, parents, food service staff, and community members in the farm to school world (National Farm to School Network, 2017). Considering that over 30 million children ate school lunch nationwide in 2016, the opportunity to educate young

people about where their food comes from and to bring healthy, local food into schools has significant long-term potential (USDA Food and Nutrition Services, 2017).

But how do we put the FARM in farm to school? A productive and coordinated relationship between producers and the schools is key, since without producers, farm to school programs would not be possible.

Here are a few points that producers should keep in mind when selling to schools:

1. Schools have nutrient requirements they must meet for each child's tray. This includes minimum requirements for protein, fruits, vegetables and whole grains. Knowledge of these requirements is helpful in understanding how much and what kind of foods can be sold to schools (School Nutrition Association, 2017).
2. Schools usually will have a lower purchasing price point for food than other market outlets. "This is because schools that participate in the National School Lunch Program have, on average, about \$1.00 to \$1.25 per meal to spend on food. This number is tied to the per-meal amount the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) provides to schools for each reimbursable meal served, which is benchmarked to student income levels and adjusted each summer by USDA." In order for schools to buy local foods, the price point cannot be too high (Northup, 2017).
3. Market products that are versatile to schools are cost-effective and can be used in many dishes. For example, beef producers should keep in mind that schools are more likely to purchase ground beef because of cost and product versatility (Montana Beef to School Project, 2016).

There are several great reasons that farmers and ranchers should develop relationships and sell to schools. Here are just a few:

1. Selling to schools is a large "one-stop shop" for many types of produce and meats. Partnering with a large institutional customer such as a school saves time in making multiple trips to farmers markets or marketing for CSA shares.
2. Schools are able and willing to use in recipes the seconds and oversized or imperfect

produce that might not sell in the retail marketplace.

3. Schools are able to make large commitments to purchase produce and meat far in advance. Contracts between farms, ranches, and schools can be set up. These large, advanced contracts can give both the producer and school peace of mind. In addition, having these types of contracts allows farmers and ranchers to grow their market in other sectors or with other buyers. And having contracts with one large institutional buyer may make a business more attractive to other large buyers.
4. Farmers, producers, and ranches feel valued. They can visit the school, talk with the kids who are eating the food, and really showcase what they do.

## Two Stories Worth the Telling

In Montana alone, 115 schools have reported participating in some form of farm to school program, with 47% of these schools purchasing local meats (Montana Team Nutrition Program, 2016). Here are stories of two Montana ranches partnering with local schools. The schools are far from large, urban school districts that are often thought of as the more likely home for farm to school programs. Read on to learn more about these ranches and their partner schools. These stories were originally written for a case study report that features six beef to school partnerships between ranchers, processors, and schools in Montana. For access to the full case study report, titled *Mooving Forward Together: Strategies for Montana Beef to School*, visit the Montana Beef to School website at <http://montana.edu/mtfarmtoschool/beeftoschool.html>.

## Beef to School at Bear Paw Meats

### Cattle Inventory in Blaine, Phillips, and Hill Counties

- Blaine County 2015 Cattle Inventory: 65,000
- Phillips County 2015 Cattle Inventory: 81,000
- Hill County 2015 Cattle Inventory: 22,500

### 2014 Human Population:

- Blaine: 6,576
- Phillips: 4,194
- Hill: 16,434

### Processor Inspection Status:

- State-Inspected Facility

### Related ATTRA Resources [www.attra.ncat.org](http://www.attra.ncat.org)

Bringing Local Food to Local Institutions

Connecting with Institutional Markets: Strategies and Programs for Producers (video)

Selling Food to Schools: USDA Guidelines (video)

## Who is Bear Paw Meats?

Bear Paw Meats, located in Chinook, Montana, serves North Central Montana customers south of the Canadian border. With a background in agriculture, Carla and Dexter Buck purchased Bear Paw Meats in 2006 and manage it along with several of their children. Grandchildren tend to also be present, adding to the family feeling of the business. Each family member has a unique role that contributes to the success of the operation. Bear Paw Meats also employs non-family members to help keep the operation running smoothly and efficiently.

## Business Model

Bear Paw Meats is a family-owned, vertically integrated cattle, feeding, auction, processing, and retail meat enterprise. Vertical integration means that the company owns and operates the supply chain for the final product (produce feed, ranch cattle, and process meat). The operation is a state-inspected facility, allowing its products to be sold to virtually any buyer within the state of Montana.

Before the Bucks purchased Bear Paw Meats, their business model was entirely focused on serving clients' custom processing needs. Bear Paw's customers would bring in live cattle, sheep, or pigs for processing and request various cuts of meat. Since purchasing the operation, the Bucks have expanded their business model to include processing animals owned by Bear Paw Meats and sold directly to customers (restaurants, schools, and individuals). The facility now processes cattle, sheep, and pigs.

Bear Paw's core customer base is located in Blaine, Hill, and Phillips Counties. The business also services Montana customers beyond this three-county region, including clients in Cascade and Valley Counties. In these counties, Bear Paw meats sells to restaurants, schools, and individuals.

The Buck family business is very busy. At the processing plant in Chinook, customers can stop in and purchase a wide variety of beef products, including steaks, roasts, hamburger, Italian sausage, beef jerky, and even dog bones. For larger accounts such as businesses or institutions, Bear Paw delivers orders directly to the customer's location.

Dexter and Carla's daughter, Ashley, heads up a retail location 20 miles away in Havre, which opened in 2015. This location offers the same



Photo: NCAT

products as the Chinook location, as well as other Montana-made products, specialty local foods, wine and craft beer, and frozen fish. Throughout the summer, Bear Paw Meats also sells products at farmers markets in Great Falls and Havre. Additionally, Bear Paw Livestock Commission Company, the family's auction enterprise, holds cattle auctions every Friday, as well as occasional special sales. Additional farming operations are devoted to raising crops that are used as feed for animals in Bear Paw's small feedlot. The farming operations include raising barley, silage corn, and alfalfa.

## Production and Processing

Cattle, primarily Angus, are sold through Bear Paw Meats' retail outlets. The animals are all under the age of 30 months and most are in the 18 to 24 month range. Many of these animals are purchased at about 6 months of age from local ranchers.

The cattle used in Bear Paw's retail operation are put in the operation's feed lot for approximately 180 days. They are fed a ration of barley, alfalfa, and corn silage. Most the feed is grown by Bear Paw, but they also purchase feed, typically barley, from local farmers.

Animals purchased from local ranchers are finished in Bear Paw Meats' small feed lot and account for 15% to 20% of all cattle processed by the company each year. Bear Paw Meats processes around 200 head of its own cattle each year and markets the beef directly to customers

through one of several retail operations. Custom cutting accounts for the majority of more than 1,100 cattle processed by Bear Paw Meats each year. Currently, the business harvests cattle only on Thursdays when the state inspector is on-site and processes on other days of the week.

## ***History of This Area's Beef to School Program***

Since 2008, Bear Paw Meats has been selling products to K-12 schools in its region to use in school lunch programs. Bear Paw Meats began selling to schools after they observed that their quality of beef was higher than what was being sold to schools. The Bucks believe that the quality of burger is largely dependent on what the cattle are fed. With their vertically integrated operation, they are able to control feed and create a consistent product for school lunchrooms and all of their customers. Bear Paw Meats considers beef to be local if it is produced, processed, and sold regionally.

## ***School Partnerships***

Bear Paw Meats worked with several schools in the region during the 2015-2016 school year. Hinsdale Public School is one example. During that school year, one-fourth of Bear Paw Meat's processed beef went to area schools. Each year,

Bear Paw Meats tries to grow its beef to school program by adding another school. Schools primarily utilize Bear Paw Meats' ground beef in their menu offerings. Items like tacos, lasagna, sloppy joes, hamburgers, spaghetti, and a variety of casseroles are regulars on school menus. Some schools also buy Bear Paw Meats roast beef. Selling beef to schools has also opened the door for Bear Paw to sell pork sausages to schools for their breakfast programs.

## ***Why Build a Beef to School Program?***

Customers, including schools, appreciate that they can trace beef purchased from Bear Paw Meats to the producer and processor. Many parents also like being informed about the nutrition of what is being served in the school cafeteria and Bear Paw can provide that information. In the company's experience, some communities are more supportive than others of local beef and farm to school products in general. As such, the business looks to educate consumers about the many benefits of local beef. In some schools, students are aware that the beef in their lunch is provided by a local animal, processed in a local facility, and delivered by a local company to their cafeterias. Carla enjoys educating students about the local beef supply chain.

Bear Paw Meats' owners consider their products to be high-quality and feel that their beef is of higher quality than beef sold by large distributors. One advantage of their product is that it is easier to track the beef sold through Bear Paw Meats than by large distributors. Furthermore, an animal of the specific age range that Bear Paw markets, between 18 and 30 months, is at least a choice-grade quality animal. The beef from a large distributor could have come from a young animal, very similar to Bear Paw's, or it could have come from a much old cull cow or bull. Meat from older animals cannot grade the same as meat from young animals. Carla also pointed out that they finish (or fatten) their animals on a fairly consistent ration of local feeds, primarily barley, silage corn, and alfalfa hay. This helps them to produce beef with a very consistent nutritional profile from one animal to the next. The meat processed through Bear Paw Meats does not add fillers (such as soymeal, lentils, or ice chips) and is 86% to 88% lean. This type of consistency may be difficult to obtain from a large distributor.



*Beef and other locally grown foods can be featured in Harvest of the Month events at schools. Photo: NCAT*

## How to Connect with Schools

For Bear Paw Meats, the best way to connect with schools has been through the head cook, since school chefs love the food that they are serving to students. The business promotes the benefits of working with local beef products in the kitchen and how much the students will enjoy consuming those products. The head cook usually has to discuss local beef purchases with the superintendent. Connecting with the superintendent may also be helpful in promoting the beef to school program. When having a conversation with school staff, it has been important to explain that schools are allowed to purchase beef directly from state-inspected facilities per Montana agricultural policy.

The business recommends starting the beef to school conversation in spring, as most head cooks have their ordering completed no later than beginning of the school year. Most head cooks do not work in the school food service during the summer. The best way to connect is through an in-person visit.

Schools primarily order raw ground beef. The steaks and roasts from these animals are marketed primarily through restaurants and Bear Paw Meats' retail outlets. Some of the hamburger from these animals is marketed to schools. Two schools order large arm, chuck, or rump roasts or deli roast beef used for French dip sandwiches. Bear Paw Meats does not market any pre-cooked burger to schools, but they do provide pork sausage links to several school breakfast programs.

Bear Paw Meats delivers orders to schools on a regular schedule. Customers place their phone order and receive weekly or bi-weekly deliveries. Since the processor is state-inspected, the business employs two delivery drivers who travel to the east and west of the business. They like having a delivery model where their product is labeled and delivered separately from other products, as this approach allows the product to stand out more. Through research, Bear Paw learned that only federally inspected processors can have their products delivered through larger delivery services such as Sysco.

## Beef to School Costs

Bear Paw Meats sells its beef at prices that fluctuate. Those prices are determined by market supply and demand, as well as by factors such as the costs of purchasing, feeding, and processing



*Meat processors in rural communities can be challenged by the lack of a skilled, consistent workforce. Photo: NCAT*

cattle. Schools receive a less expensive price on beef than the public because they buy in bulk packaging. Since the cost of local beef is usually a concern for schools, Bear Paw Meats talks with schools' head cooks about how price determines quality across the beef market.

## Beef to School Program Needs

Bear Paw Meats has taken several factors into consideration for maintaining a beef to school program. Regarding food safety, the company follows guidelines for state-inspected facilities and safe delivery practices for every customer. As such, it does not need to modify its food-safety practices specifically for schools. Working with schools has required that the company stay informed about nutrition guidelines for protein in the National School Breakfast and Lunch Programs. Attention to the guidelines was particularly important when changes were made in ounce-serving requirements of protein foods at schools in the Healthy, Hunger-Free Kids Act of 2010.

A majority of schools that Bear Paw Meats works with have enough storage space to receive beef every other week. The company has marketed its beef to school program to other schools that would require deliveries once per week. Bear Paw also purchased a new grinder to process ground beef for schools' orders.

Bear Paw Meats markets its beef to school program directly to schools. In the future, the company plans to provide information in its advertisements about involvement with beef to school.

## ***Sustaining a Beef to School Program***

Supporting a beef to school program takes time on behalf of Bear Paw Meats to educate school food services about such things as how to set up orders and deliveries with a new and smaller businesses and how to use raw and local beef products in the kitchen. Sometimes it is difficult to convince food service staff to engage in beef to school when they are accustomed to obtaining and using the same food products for years. Specific to the region of Montana in which Bear Paw Meats resides, finding skilled and consistent labor to accommodate production levels has been a challenge.

**I** saw the quality of burger that was being fed to our children. And I think that our children are our future... In order for them to develop appropriately, they need to be fed good-quality food."

— Karla Buck,  
Bear Paw Meats

## ***The Future of Beef to School for Bear Paw Meats***

Bear Paw Meats sees community support as key to growing beef to school programming in the future. For example, parents could advocate for farm to school products by petitioning school board officials to increase the use of Montana foods in Montana lunchrooms.

## **Beef to School at Lazy SR Ranch**

350 road miles south and west of Bear Paw Meats is another ranch that has served one larger school district.

### **Cattle Inventory in Park, Gallatin, and Sweet Grass Counties**

- Park County 2015 Cattle Inventory: 42,000
- Gallatin County 2015 Cattle Inventory: 47,500
- Sweet Grass County 2015 Cattle Inventory: 36,000

### **2014 Human Population**

- Park: 15,642
- Gallatin: 93,108
- Sweet Grass: 3,622

### **Processor Inspection Status**

- Works with Ranchland Packing (Federally Inspected Facility)

## ***Who is Lazy SR Ranch?***

Lazy SR Ranch is located in the picturesque Shields River Valley about 30 miles north of Livingston, Montana. Dirk and Miki Adams own and operate the ranch with the help of employees. Lazy SR Ranch has been in operation for over 30 years. For its first 20-plus years, the ranch was a traditional cow-calf operation. Some 900 mother cows produced high-quality Black Angus calves to be sold to the cattle market in the fall of each year. When requests for local beef increased about five years ago, Lazy SR started holding some calves each fall for direct marketing. The held cattle are owned by Lazy SR until they are ready to be slaughtered and processed for retail sale. Today, about 80% of the calves are sold each fall to feedlots for finishing or to other ranchers as replacement heifers.

## ***Business Model***

Lazy SR Ranch offers beef products and other meats. It raises heritage chickens, heritage turkeys, Berkshire pigs, and Leicester lambs, in addition to cattle. The animals are not treated with hormones or sub-therapeutic antibiotics. Beef, lamb, and pigs are processed by outside processors. Turkeys and chickens are raised in a pasture and processed in a facility owned and operated by Lazy SR.

Currently, Lazy SR Ranch supplies meat to businesses in Yellowstone, Gallatin, and Park Counties of Montana and utilizes Summit Distribution based out of Bozeman, Montana, to assist with sales and delivery. Lazy SR markets the finished beef products through four different marketing channels: custom cutting, grocery stores, businesses, and institutions.

Customers can place an order for a whole, half, or quarter beef for custom cutting. In custom cutting arrangements, the client provides instructions for how the meat is to be cut and packaged. Lazy SR then has the animal processed by Ranchland Packing in Butte, Montana, to meet the customer's specific needs. Customers can also stop at the local grocery store in nearby Wilsall and purchase individual cuts of meat. The grocery store is owned by Lazy SR and is managed by Dirk's daughter. The store offers a variety of grocery items, including a nice selection of beef products from Lazy SR. These marketing options primarily serve individual customers.

Another marketing option focuses on businesses

and institutional customers, including schools, grocery stores, restaurants, and hospitals. Businesses and institutions can contact Lazy SR to place an order for the week or for a season. Some clients place orders for a single cut of beef, such as 20 ribeye steaks, while others will order a variety of cuts. Clients may also order ahead for an entire season, and deliveries of that order are made as scheduled. Larger orders can then be set aside to be delivered when the customer needs it, allowing businesses to have a consistent price for that cut of meat for an extended period of time. Local businesses and institutions include the Community Food Co-op and Sola Market in Bozeman, Good Earth Market in Billings, Livingston Health Center, and Livingston School District. Through Summit Distribution, the beef supplied by Lazy SR has also been sold to Montana State University.

### ***Production and Processing***

Cattle raised for retail sales are kept on the Lazy SR ranch until they reach six months of age or about 850 pounds. The cattle are then sent to Hobson, Montana, to feed on Montana grains until they reach approximately 1,350 pounds. Lazy SR is proud that the animals are grass-fed and grain-finished in Montana. Once the animals reach market weight, they are processed by a local meat-processing facility, currently Ranchland Packing in Butte. Ranchland Packing's inspection status allows Lazy SR's meat to be sold in Montana and other states. Most processing facilities in Montana are state-inspected, which does not allow for the finished products to be marketed in other states. Lazy SR retains ownership of these animals from birth all the way through processing. In 2015, Lazy SR sent 175 animals to slaughter. In the future, Lazy SR Ranch would like to investigate spacing the slaughter at quarterly intervals to assist with quality control.

### ***History of the School Partnerships***

Schools have been important clients for Lazy SR for the past few years, most notably the Livingston School District. Livingston's first local beef supplier could not provide the supply of beef required for the District. At that point, Lazy SR built its relationship with Livingston, and the ranch has enough beef available to supply the school's needs. Lazy SR's business model allows the ranch

to reduce its calf sales and finish more cattle to increase its beef supply as demand increases.

Lazy SR Ranch worked with Livingston School District during the 2015-2016 school year. The district primarily orders hamburger for school lunch and occasionally purchases other products, such as roasts.

Miki believes that supporting a local school is worthwhile, as students should know and learn about where their food comes from. Lazy SR invites students and school groups to its ranch to learn about meat production. For example, students are able to walk through the entire farm to table process in the poultry plant that is owned and operated by the ranch.

### ***Why Build a Beef to School Program?***

Dirk and Miki believe that it is also important to support the local food system. Lazy SR demonstrates this support by providing local beef and education to Livingston School District. Local beef in the lunchroom provides students with the opportunity to learn where their food comes from, how it is processed, and the importance of sustainability in the food system. The students appreciate the local beef, as well, notes Miki. She enjoys hearing the students say how much they love the burgers they had for lunch that day.

Miki also believes that supporting a beef to school program has benefits for the community. Although Lazy SR is currently the beef supplier for the Livingston School District, other ranches in the area are proud that the beef being served to the children in the community is coming from the Shields Valley.

### ***How to Connect with Schools***

Developing a relationship with the school, and especially the food service director, is key to making beef to school work. The food service director in Livingston made the initial contact with Lazy SR Ranch when another beef supplier in the area was unable to meet the demand of the school district.

Having a relationship with a bigger school or school district is helpful in planning how much beef the ranch needs to produce. Putting a contract in place also assists with forecasting production needs over a given time period, particularly when dealing with the school calendar.



Producers can share their story with kids, teachers, and parents by hosting tours and visiting the classroom. Photo: Montana FoodCorps, Demetrius Fassas

Product distribution is another important aspect of the beef to school process. Lazy SR utilizes the services of Summit Distribution in Bozeman to assist with the delivery of its beef to the school district in Livingston. Summit Distribution is able to deliver the meat in the refrigerated truck to the schools, ensuring that food safety standards are met.

### **Beef to School Costs**

Lazy SR Ranch sells its beef at prices that fluctuate, determined partly by supply and demand of the market and partly by what the school is able to afford. The price of a particular cut of beef is based on factors such as the costs of purchasing, feeding, and processing cattle.

### **Beef to School Program Needs**

There are several factors that Lazy SR Ranch has considered for maintaining a beef to school program. Adequate space and storage are required to meet the needs of the school. For this reason, Lazy SR works with Summit Distribution to assist with freezer space for the ranch. The processor that works with the producer and school should have adequate equipment to meet the needs of the school. For example, a processor that owns a hamburger-patty maker can make and supply the school district with pre-formed

hamburgers. Smaller processors may not have the resources or equipment to meet the needs of a school district. It can also be difficult to find processors who are sufficiently trained and have the skills required to adequately process beef. Meeting food-safety guidelines for the producer, processor, and school is a big consideration. The ranch relies on Ranchland Packing and Summit Distribution to deliver nutritious and safe beef to schools. In the future, Dirk and Miki may apply for grants to a buy refrigerated truck so that the ranch can make meat deliveries in-house.

Currently, the Lazy SR Ranch does not extensively publicize its beef product sales to the Livingston School District. In the future, the company would like to educate other school districts on the benefits of consuming local beef supplied by the ranch.

### **Sustaining a Beef to School Program**

Supporting a beef to school program can be challenging. One of the biggest challenges for Lazy SR is not having some type of model or directions to follow. Lazy SR has learned how to build a beef to school program “on the go” in collaboration with Livingston School District.

### **The Future of Beef to School for Lazy SR**

Lazy SR Ranch sees education as the key to growing beef to school programming in the future. They believe that processors and producers can contribute together to increase beef to school. Lazy SR Ranch notes, “We would love to sell beef to more schools.”



Summit Distribution's refrigerated trucks are an important part of the Lazy SR Ranch's beef to school program. Photo: NCAT

**W**e're very big believers in our local food system. I think that for kids to learn where their food comes from and how it's processed is really, really important."

—Miki Adams, Lazy SR Ranch

## Conclusion

In each of the beef to school examples presented here, the producers selling beef and other meats to area schools built relationships with school food service head cooks. They provided high-quality products delivered to those cooks' specifications and at a price affordable to the schools. There was no Farm to School blueprint or model from which these ranches could readily draw.

They had to rely on their relationships with the schools' staff to work through challenges of doing something different and new. The schools bought burger, roasts, and other cuts that don't command a premium price and are more difficult for producers and processors to sell. Farm to school sales in these instances were not only another *outlet* for beef, but an opportunity to diversify *the type of beef cuts* sold to local market channels.

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## Further Resources

### Working With Your Meat Processor

<https://attra.ncat.org/attra-pub/livestock/marketing.html>  
*This publication offers farmers and ranchers strategies for building relationships with their meat processors.*

**Selling Local Food to Schools: A Resource for Producers**  
[www.fns.usda.gov/sites/default/files/f2s/FactSheet\\_Selling\\_Local.pdf](http://www.fns.usda.gov/sites/default/files/f2s/FactSheet_Selling_Local.pdf)

*This fact sheet gives information for producers, ranchers and farmers ways to connect and sell directly to schools.*

### Farm to School Toolkit

[www.cias.wisc.edu/toolkits](http://www.cias.wisc.edu/toolkits)

*This website is a starter kit for farmers with many resources including the benefits of farm to school strategies for farms and schools.*

### Farm to School Outreach

<http://farmtoschool.cce.cornell.edu/resources/resources-for-farmers>

*This website has strategies for producers interested in selling to K-12 schools, including "School Lunch 101" and "How to Plan for Farm to School."*

### Community Food Systems at the USDA Food and Nutrition Services

[www.fns.usda.gov/farmtoschool/farm-school](http://www.fns.usda.gov/farmtoschool/farm-school)

*Almost everything you'll need to know about farm to school, including fact sheets, videos and webinars, grant programs, state farm to school contacts and much more.*

ATTRA would like to thank the Montana Beef to School Project partners, which includes Montana State University Food and Health Lab, Montana State Extension, Montana Team Nutrition Program, National Center for Appropriate Technology. These ranch profiles are part of the larger 2016 report *Moooooving Forward Together: Strategies for Montana Beef Producers*, which is fully cited in the References section of this publication.

These profiles were edited for further clarity and to provide readers outside of Montana a clearer picture of the ranches', schools' and processors' locations in the state. ATTRA would also like to thank Dr. Carmen Byker-Shanks for her outside review of this publication.

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## Notes

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