

Halal-Certified Poultry Processing Facility Uses MARBIDCO Grant to Grow Business Coast-to-Coast



Establishing a hand-cutting halal poultry processing plant with assembly in efficiency was deemed impossible by many in the poultry sector.

Abdolreza Hajir, having spent numerous years working in poultry facilities, gained insights into the industry from the ground up. Driven by his deep faith and self-belief, he pressed on towards realizing his dream.

“No one believed we could create such efficiency with hand cut chickens,” said Robert Hajir, son of Abdolreza and CEO of Ihsan Farms.

Fast forward to today, Abdolreza and Robert operate a thriving and efficient Halal-certified poultry processing plant tucked away in a business park in Princess Anne.

Since opening in 2016, Ihsan Farms has been a Halal-certified poultry processing facility and wholesaler. Father and son have a combined 65 years of experience in the poultry and halal industries.

The term “halal” translates to permissible in Arabic. A practicing Muslim applies this “halal” concept to every aspect of life. Specific to meat consumption, the type of meat and how it is processed is important.

“For meat to be deemed halal, it must be harvested in the name of God to feed his people, as well as using the correct technique for cutting the meat according to Islamic law,” Robert explained.

At Ihsan Farms, this practice is performed by hand, a rarity in the industry. It can take up to six months to properly train a person in this method, said Robert.

Ihsan Farms is proud to provide all-natural poultry that is free from chemicals and additives. They prioritize cleanliness and hygiene at every step of the production process, including no chlorine used in processing.

The chickens are instead cleaned using peracetic acid, a vegetable-derived organic compound that acts as a strong oxidizing agent, effective against a wide range of organisms.

Ihsan Farms aims to deliver the finest quality poultry while strictly adhering to the necessary guidelines and procedures for exclusively producing hand slaughtered “Zabiha” halal poultry.

“Animal welfare is paramount, and no mechanical machines are used to process the chicken,” said Robert. “We are a religious organization before a business.”

Workers, most who have been with the company since its inception, work side-by-side as chickens are connected to a system that transports them from a chiller – after slaughter

and feather removal in a barrel picker – to others who manually cut the breasts, thighs, legs, and wings from the birds.

A quality assurance worker stands by the chiller as the birds come out and determines which chickens will be sold whole or cut into pieces.

Robert says this way of processing chicken is the most humane and creates a tasty and very tender bird. “We have the best chicken going,” he said.

Ihsan Farms gets young 5-pound chickens from around 40 to 80 farmers, with half of them sourced from Maryland, including Caroline and Dorchester counties, along with farms in Delaware and Virginia.

According to Robert, the poultry are fed an antibiotic-free, completely vegetarian diet, which makes raising the chickens a little more challenging compared to standard poultry farms.

After seeking help to purchase new equipment, local and state agency officials told them about MARBIDCO. Ihsan Farms sought a Maryland Livestock Processing Equipment Grant from MARBIDCO, supported by a team of MBA candidates from Salisbury University. The students took this chance to gain experience in business consulting and selected Ihsan Farms for their project. Ihsan Farms was awarded the grant funding that enables them to enhance its chicken processing capacity, boost sales to both new and existing vendors, and employ additional staff.

The Maryland Livestock Processing Equipment Grant Program was created by MARBIDCO to assist with the expansion of livestock processing capacity in Maryland.

This program offers grants to eligible applicants to purchase livestock and meat processing equipment and/or upgrade facilities to help increase production in Maryland, with a particular focus on large-animal and blue catfish processing.

Smaller-scale poultry processing projects are also eligible.

Eligible applicants must currently operate livestock and meat processing enterprises in Maryland. These applicants can include sole proprietorships, partnerships, cooperatives, corporations, or LLCs. The minimum grant award is \$5,000, with a maximum award of \$50,000.

This particular grant award funded a second water chiller and the installation of this equipment.

“The chiller brings down the temperature of the chickens faster”, explained Robert.

“We bought this second one to increase production.” The chiller will bring the chicken’s temperature below 36 degrees.

Hajir said that chickens processed today, go out the same day.

“This is our first grant,” said Abdolreza. It is crucial for small businesses to receive this kind of economic development assistance he explained.

His son added, “We have been creating jobs and adding \$2 million to the local economy....and we are very grateful to

MARBIDCO for this opportunity.” Ihsan Farms is certified halal by Halal Food Council USA, the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), Halal Monitoring Services, and the American Halal Foundation.

It is the only U.S. poultry facility certified to export to the United Arab Emirates and expects to become the first poultry facility certified to export to Malaysia by 2026.

As a wholesaler, Ihsan Farms sells whole birds and chicken cuts to distributors that sell to their local communities via mom-and-pop shops throughout the country.

Its poultry distribution is handled by small family businesses in New York City, Chicago, Washington D.C., Philadelphia, Atlanta, Boston, Detroit, Tampa, Baltimore, Orlando, Milwaukee, Richmond, Texas, and Seattle.

With the assistance of this grant, they anticipate expanding production capacity to be able to serve California and other southwestern states.

They are also currently planning the construction of another halal-certified facility in Hurlock (Dorchester County) in 2026-2027.

Besides the owners and plant managers the company employs a religious advisor from the Delmarva Muslim Community who also has a degree in food technology to guide the business in meeting the halal requirements.

Additionally, two USDA employees have an office at the facility. Dr. Sara Elmahdi, a consumer safety inspector, and Pamela

Green, a food inspector, assure that the facility follows USDA's meat processing guidelines. Inspector Green looks at each bird as it readied for processing and Dr. Elmahdi assures safe and healthy birds are being sold.

"They are doing great," said USDA's Green. "They learn and evolve. I love working here."

The company also prides itself on reducing its potential impact on water quality. "We work with MDA, MDE, and Somerset County local stormwater management. We make sure we have minimal impact on the environment," said Robert.

Workers, who can be siblings, married couples, or parents and adult children number 53 today. About half are female, one fourth are Muslim.

"We have low turnover and high retention. We pay well and treat our employees like family," explained Robert.

"There is no pressure, we run slow and have had no workplace injuries."

Running slowly ironically translates to processing 10,000 birds daily or 10 million annually. Besides running a successful business, Ihsan Farms engages frequently with the Muslim and local communities.

They donate chickens to nearby fire departments for fundraising barbecues, supply chickens to families unable to afford meals, for mourners after the loss of a loved one, offer chickens to a local senior center, collaborate with local schools to provide information about careers in agriculture, and inspire young individuals to pursue careers as plumbers, electricians, and engage in apprenticeships.

Additionally, they educate the staff at other chicken processing plants and farmers on the Halal method.