

MVAPG (CAO) Grant Recipient: Sudlersville Frozen Meat Locker



The COVID-19 Pandemic has caused many challenges for businesses. For Dwayne and Dawna Nickerson, owners of Sudlersville Frozen Meat Locker, LLC, a meat processor in Queen Anne's County, the pandemic resulted in a surge of customer interest. Thanks

to the Maryland Value Added Producer Grant – Capital Assets Option (MVAPG- CAO) that they received in the Fall of 2019 from MARBIDCO, they have been able to keep up with the demand for their products. Grant funds from this program were used to purchase a new vacuum pack machine.

“It definitely has been an asset to receive the grant money,” said Dwayne. “Before we were doing most of the packaging by hand, now the [vacuum pack] machine does 95% of the work.”

Last fall, as the Nickerson's began building a new processing room, they learned about MARBIDCO's MVAPG-CAO program. Applications for the program are accepted once a year, and applicants can apply for grants between \$2,500 and \$10,000. They are distributed on a competitive basis for value-added processing capital asset projects to eligible crop or livestock producers or processors, agricultural cooperatives, seafood processors, or primary or secondary timber products processors that have been in business for a minimum of two years. Applicants must be creating a product that is value-added and provide a one-for-one cash match.

Already expanding their business, Dwayne and Dawna applied to the grant program and were awarded funds to purchase a vacuum packing machine to increase their business's efficiency. On an average week, the Sudlersville Frozen Meat Locker processes 12 to 14 beef cows and 35 to 40 hogs. In the summer, they process up to 60 hogs in a week.

The impact that the pandemic had on the Nickerson's' business has been drastic. In the beginning, customers could not enter the store. Vehicles would pull up to the shop, and the customer would be handed a menu of what meat was available. On the first Saturday of this service, 305 people showed up between 8:00 a.m. and 1:30 p.m., according to Dwayne.

He estimated that over the course of the first Friday and Saturday, they had over 400 customers. Fortunately, the business now is able to open its doors to 10 customers at a time when they wear masks. They are open Tuesday through Friday from 10:00 a.m. to 5:00 p.m. and Saturday from 8:00 a.m. to 1:00 p.m.

According to Dwayne, since the pandemic started demand for their products has increased substantially. Because more customers are stocking up on meat, they have had to increase their processing rate. Before, they were producing 1,200 lbs. to 1,500 lbs. of ground beef a week. "We're now producing 3,500 lbs. to 4,000 lbs. of ground beef a week and working seven days a week," said Dwayne. "On Saturday's we have five additional family members working to help keep up with demand. It's been hectic."

The impact coronavirus had on the Nickerson's' business led them to apply for MARBIDCO's Pandemic Adjustment Equipment Grant Fund (PAEGF), which they received. Using this grant, they plan to adjust their business by building a larger cold storage facility that will increase their storage capacity and help them work with local farmers by allowing them to increase the amount of animals they can slaughter. The Nickerson's plan to maintain their increased level of production.

"We plan to keep processing safe products and keeping our customers happy," said Dwayne. "Thank you to MARBIDCO for working with us, it's been an absolute pleasure."