

## The Best of Years, the Worst of Years

Beth and Jody Osmund, Ottawa, Illinois

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### Bringing the Retail Dollar Home

Coodinator: Beth Osmund

Location: Ottawa, Illinois

SARE Grant: \$5,938

Grant Year: 2007

Project Number: FNC06-611

With the help of a SARE grant, Beth and Jody Osmund jump-started a successful meat CSA. The grant allowed them to purchase a cold-plate, ice cream freezer in which to store the meat, as well as a trailer for transporting the freezer to farmer's markets.

**B**eth and Jody Osmund were fast asleep when a fierce storm, dumping 6½ inches of rain, rolled through their area in late August of 2007. They woke up to discover that about 400 of their chicks had drowned in 18 inches of water that had pooled in the low end of their pasture. This just added to the losses that the Osmunds had already suffered in 2007, more than in any previous year. But despite the losses, 2007 was also the best of years, thanks to their focus on retail meat.

"2007 was simultaneously our most successful year and the year we've suffered the greatest losses," says Beth Osmund, co-owner of the 85-acre farm in Ottawa, Illinois. "That's because the scale of what we were doing was that much bigger."

With the help of a SARE grant, the Osmunds were able to jump-start a meat CSA (Community Supported Agriculture) in 2007. The grant allowed them to purchase a 6-cubic-foot, cold-plate, ice cream freezer in which to store the meat, as well as a trailer for transporting the freezer to and from farmer's markets.

For a \$240 fee, plus a small delivery charge, Osmund says CSA members share in the "risk as well as the bounty," receiving a package of frozen meat, about \$80 to \$85 worth, each month for three months.



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The Osmunds had been running a vegetable CSA for five years. But she says they have phased out the vegetable CSA and in 2008 are focused only on meats. Meat CSA's are not as common as vegetable CSA's, she says, so this "puts us in a unique position. There are only a couple of other farms offering the kind of meat we do."

In addition, they can offer the meats year-round, and the work is less grueling.

"My short explanation for why we're focusing only on meats next year is that I've never once had to weed the freezer," says Osmund.

The Osmunds go to farmer's markets twice a week—on Saturdays and Sundays. They sell their meat at a local market in Ottawa, as well as at the Logan Square farmer's market on the north side of Chicago. Generally, she says, they sell more steaks than roasts in Chicago and vice versa in Ottawa.

According to Osmund, they do not give their animals growth hormones or antibiotics. By keeping drugs out of the food chain, she says, the result is better-tasting, healthier eggs and meat—chicken, beef, pork, and turkey.

"The animals are healthy because they're well taken care of," Osmund explains. "Our animals are in small groups; they're not in a large, concentrated feedlot situation where the goal is to put as many animals in as small a space as possible and fatten them as quickly as you can."

The cows have to be rotated on a regular basis when the pastures become grazed down. But the pigs, which are kept in open pens in fields, do not have to be moved as often. The chickens and turkeys, meanwhile, spend a couple of weeks in the brooder before being moved into 10-by-10-foot pens, each of which holds between 75 to 90 chickens. It takes eight weeks from hatching until the chickens are ready for the butcher.

One problem the Osmunds have had to contend with is predation. Rats got into their brooder in 2007, killing about 100 chicks. In addition, raccoons found a way into the pens, costing them about another 100 chickens. However, they alleviated the raccoon problem by rigging an electric fence about 6 inches off the ground around the pens, and in 2008 they have added two livestock guardian dogs.

Meanwhile, the customer response to their meat CSA, Osmund says, has been overwhelmingly positive. As she puts it, "99.9 percent of the people come back and say 'Oh my gosh you're right, that was the best chicken I've ever had' or 'I've never had steak like that before.'"

However, Osmund says they have learned they need to focus their operation, which is one reason they have decided to specialize in meats only.

"It's a lesson we continually have to learn," she says. "We have to keep focused enough to be successful and diverse enough to continue enjoying and challenging ourselves."

By Jason Peterson