

Detours on the Road to Success

Les and Penny Gioja, Champaign, Illinois

Linking Downstate Illinois Small-Scale Goat and Sheep Producers

Coordinator: Les and Penny Gioja

Location: Champaign, Illinois

SARE Grant: \$2,338

Grant Year: 1998

Project Number: FNC98-245

Les and Penny Gioja set out to link small-scale goat and sheep producers to a lucrative meat market in northern Illinois metropolitan areas. But the Giojas and other downstate producers changed their marketing approach and now sell their goats and sheep in areas closer to home.



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Les and Penny Gioja picked an unfortunate day to start transporting goats from downstate Illinois to markets in the northern Illinois metropolitan area—January 1, 1999. That was the first of a three-day snowfall, which eventually left just over 21 inches of snow in Chicago—the city's second-greatest snowfall of all-time.

Conditions were so bad on the way home, Les Gioja recalls, that their empty trailer threw them off of the road several times. They eventually had to park the trailer in an empty lot and come back later to pick it up.

As this event came to symbolize, the best-laid plans don't always come out the way you expect. When the Giojas began their SARE project in 1998, their objective was to link small-scale goat and sheep producers to a lucrative meat market in northern Illinois metropolitan areas.

"But what we accomplished was a little different than what we set out to do," says Gioja.

Before they could sell to any of the northern Illinois markets, he says it was necessary to produce a fairly large number of goats per week. The Giojas run a small operation near Champaign, Illinois, so their plan was to unite small, downstate producers, pool their resources, and transport goats to the Chicago area to meet whatever quotas they could.

A group of six to eight of the producers decided to share in the transportation of goats. But after the 1999 snowstorm, he says, "We learned early on that transportation could be a problem."

In addition to the logistics of transporting livestock, there was the question of liability.

"In one of our shipments, we had one producer who had three animals die," says Gioja. "When an animal dies, whose responsibility is it? We're taking it from the producer to the processor. When does liability change hands?"

"Even if the animal doesn't die, if it's a long trip the animal will lose weight, and

animals are bought and sold on a weight basis," he continues. "Where do you make up that money? Those are big issues that came into effect and caused us to rethink the whole process."

Eventually, their buyer decided to look for a local group to supply the animals he needed, and the Giojas and the other downstate producers decided to change their marketing approach.

"In fact," says Gioja, "what we're involved in now is a local growing concept. The food you eat really should be grown pretty close by and you should limit transportation."

Today, the Giojas raise and sell goats, sheep, chickens, turkeys, ducks, geese, and cattle. They also sell milk and eggs, and the majority of their customers are from the surrounding area.

Although the goal of connecting downstate producers to the northern metro areas never did come to fruition, Gioja is pleased with the overall outcome of the project.

"The whole process actually started a number of things that have been very useful," said Gioja. "For instance, the Illinois Meat Goat Producers started with this project, and they're still in operation today. We also wanted to develop a directory of processing plants and producers. Another organization has finished that, so it's available as well.

"Our ultimate goal was to encourage other producers to get started and to provide an outlet for small growers to be able to sell their animals," Gioja adds. "In that respect, we've been very successful. We created a network that's been very beneficial, and that network started with this grant."

By Leanne Lucas