

CASE STUDY: RAINY RIVER MEATS

*Contributions to the emergence
of the Northern Ontario resilient
and connected food hub*

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Rainy River Meats

Social Innovation

Rainy River Meats (RRM) is an innovative meat processing facility located in Emo, Ontario. It demonstrates innovation because of how it emerged as a business, its structural approach to operations and the critical supportive role it plays in the broader food community. Rainy River Meats offers:

- A retail local food business owned by four local farm families;
- Three full-time and one part-time sustainable employment positions funded through revenues generated;
- Marketing of local products at a diversity of outlets including: farmers' markets throughout the Rainy River and Kenora Districts, Cloverbelt On-line Local Food Co-op out of Dryden, as well as other retail and restaurant outlets across Northwestern Ontario;
- A value impact social enterprise that supports the agriculture community including 4-H, Rainy River District Cattlemen's Association, Ontario Federation of Agriculture, and the Rainy River District Regional Abattoir;
- A focus on butcher services for meats raised by the owners and other farmers in the Rainy River District;
- A mobile market (with freezers) to provide their products to Farmers' Markets within Rainy River and Kenora Districts, as well as the Cloverbelt Local Food Co-op;
- Custom-cut and wrap services for self-consumption including wild game processing, farm gate sales and retail outlets;
- Value-added retail products from other local food producers/processors including local honey, walleye, wild rice and cheddar cheese;
- Fish (walleye) from a commercially-licensed First Nation fish enterprise;
- Subscriptions to *Buy Local - Buy Fresh*, and a member of Fort Frances local branding initiative '*Go Local*'.

Overview

Rainy River Meats

The Rainy River District continues its strong agricultural base that emerged about 150 years ago when early settlers and Native peoples strengthened the local economy via commercial production of local foods for late nineteenth century timber and mining companies. More recently, a local abattoir/processing plant, Stratton Meats, operated for over 20 years in the district until closing in 1996.

A decade long project to re-establish an abattoir in the district resulted in the opening of Rainy River District Regional Abattoir in 2010. Due to the long period without a local abattoir, most cut and wrap meat shops were no longer operational. A need to re-establish additional infrastructure was identified to support the new abattoir. Rainy River Meats was established in 2011 in response to this need to provide a custom cut, wholesale and retail service outlet in support of local livestock producers.

Co-owned by four local families, Ted and Deb Zimmerman (Zimmerman Farm), Marg Irvine, Clayton Teeple and Tracy Haglin, and Steve and Pat Loshaw, Rainy River Meats strives to provide a custom cut, wholesale and retail service outlet to support local livestock producers. The primary products retailed from Rainy River Meats are those raised by the owners and other farmers in the Rainy River District. RRM prides itself in knowing where their products originate and in providing high quality products. Deb Zimmerman explains, *I'm a strong believer in knowing where things come from. I grew up on a farm, my husband grew up on a farm and we've raised our own meat all our lives. I have never bought meat from the store. More and more now we're having these problems with mass recalls and other health issues related to mass production. You don't want that in your food, and if you know where your food comes from, you're better off.*

Since opening, Rainy River Meats has expanded its retail market to include farmers markets within the Rainy River and Kenora districts. Their product line has expanded to include Lake of the Woods walleye, and value added products such as local honey, wild rice and Ontario cheddar cheese. They also serve a smaller market with unusual products, including bison and rabbit. All of the meat put through their shop is antibiotic and hormone-free. They have homemade turkey burgers, hand rolled meatballs and handmade sausages, which Deb Zimmerman calls a 'dying art', but insists it's worth all of the hard work. They also sell hard-to-find specialty products such as kidney, liver and tongue.

A large part of the retail operation includes a variety of fresh and smoked sausage products. They continue to provide a custom cut and wrap service for self-consumption and farm gate sales, as well as wild game processing. Some Rainy River Meats products are being sold through retail outlets in Kenora, Balmertown and Thunder Bay.

Rainy River Meats has one contained building where there is a butcher shop with a small retail front. RRM just recently added a smoker to their operations so they

can offer more smoked products including sausages from Cornell Farms. They also operate a mobile market (with freezers) for area farmers markets.

Impact & Benefits

Rainy River Meats is a value added social enterprise that works to promote local producers, local products and the broader agricultural community including: 4H, Rainy River Cattlemen's Association, Ontario Federation of Agriculture and the Rainy River District Regional Abattoir. Deb explains, *Programs like 4H are so important, especially for the younger generation as it shows the kids the hands-on [part], that it's not all glorified, and there is hard work to be done.*

Rainy River Meats as a private enterprise development is a mentor to encourage other processors to emerge to rebuild the infrastructure that is so important to building a resilient local Northern Ontario food system. They hold regular Board meetings and everyone has a role in operating the business. There are three full-time staff and one part-time staff funded entirely through fee-for-service/business revenues.

RRM works with local farmers markets, food co-operatives, retail restaurants and businesses in Northwestern Ontario. Rainy River Meats distributes its products:

- 1) Directly via their retail location in Emo;
- 2) Directly at Northwestern Ontario Farmers' Markets in Kenora, Sioux Lookout, Dryden, Red Lake and Fort Frances; and
- 3) At retail outlets including: the Cloverbelt Local Food Co-op (Dryden, Ignace, Upsala), as well as retail and restaurant outlets in Balmertown, Ear Falls and Kenora.

Distributing products through this diversity of channels helps meet customers' preferences and connects Rainy River Meats to the broader food community. Currently, the main drawback of all of their diverse market channels is the added time and expense of travel to farmers markets and to other retail outlets.

Opportunities for Growth

Rainy River Meats offers a much needed support service to the abattoir in the Rainy River District of Northwestern Ontario. RRM would like to continue servicing the processing needs of Northwestern Ontario. There are many

opportunities to scale up to expand their retail offerings and locations, and to reach new markets including institutions and remote fly-in communities.

Rainy River Meats is expanding their product offerings and hoping to make some upgrades for continued growth. Immediate plans include added infrastructure to provide for a greater variety of smoked products (especially sausages) and increased freezer storage capacity.

They are willing to make these expansions as long as (in Deb's words), *we don't step on the toes of other local producers*. Deb explains, *if there's a need for us we're there, but I'm not going to beat down the doors to try and ruin it for others in Northwestern Ontario. However, for every animal we put through our shop, that's one less going off to Cargill or Burns or out of the district. I'm happy with that.*

As a result of the start-up of Rainy River Meats, the District of Rainy River has seen an increase in sheep, chicken and turkey producers which they see as a huge plus in expanding the capacity and diversity of the local food system.

Rainy River Meats is very supportive of Cloverbelt Local Food Co-operative's new entrepreneurial initiative to develop a Northwestern Ontario regional food distribution system, NWOFoodEx. RRM feels that this will remove some of the current challenges of transportation and distribution so they can focus their efforts on processing/packing/wrapping products for sale. The new Northwestern Ontario food distribution system will also mean there will be access to vans with freezer capacity.

Challenges & Limitations

There are lots of opportunities for growth with respect to certain products (poultry, lamb, bison, wild game, smoked products, value added items), but RRM is limited by cash flow, staff availability, infrastructure needs/costs (equipment), and distribution costs/time/effort. As Rainy River Meats grows, they are looking to attract either an operator and/or owner to take over Rainy River Meats so the four current owners can concentrate on farm production and future farm succession.

As with all small meat processing facilities, Rainy River Meats has to adhere to different food safety and processing regulations. Sometimes the requirements of OMAFRA and CFIA are tedious, administratively burdensome and sometimes confusing or contradicting. RRM believes in providing safe processing practices, but feels that the current regulations are sometimes a hindrance and not intended for smaller operations but instead were developed for large-scale agri-industry operations.

Visions for the Future

Rainy River Meats works with beef, lamb, bison, poultry, rabbit etc. producers in Northwestern Ontario to provide cut and wrap butchering services. RRM has filled a local need by offering much needed cut/wrap butcher services, by alleviating the backlog at the local abattoir, and by offering superior local products to the Rainy River District and beyond.

RRM hopes to expand its processing abilities for additional volume, and for smoked products. As Deb explains, *a large part of what we do is geared to support local farmers. We're not just a store, but are here to help other local farmers market their products and get local food to consumers.*

Ted Zimmerman sums up Rainy River Meats' emergence as a social innovation this way: *It's slow building a business, it's one customer at a time, but it only takes one good day at market or a customer saying they've never had better meat and it makes it worthwhile.* (Dryden Observer).

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Keys for Success

Rainy River Meats is instrumental in providing support for the local abattoir in Northwestern Ontario. If RRM wasn't in operation, the abattoir would have more limited processing capacity, thus limiting the availability of local meats to consumers in the region.

RRM is taking the role of supportive processor to bridge the gap in their region for butchering, processing and wrapping meats. Without the hard work and commitment from four farm families, this operation would not exist. In order for Northwestern Ontario's food chain to grow, Rainy River Meats is supportive of opening up further capacity for secondary processing to keep up the supply to meet demand, and strengthen the local food system.

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