

Feature Story: Noah's Ark Processors' Expansion Project Creates Opportunity in Hastings

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Situated in the heart of south-central Nebraska, Noah's Ark Processors has deepened its roots in Hastings with a recent expansion project that stands as a testament to both their resilience and their commitment to reinvesting in the local community. In February, HEDC had the privilege of interviewing the team and touring the state-of-the-art Noah's Ark Processors facility located in south Hastings.

Noah's Ark Processors is a prominent provider of kosher beef, with a specialized division, WR Reserve, focusing on non-kosher beef. Since its establishment and transition of ownership in 2016, Noah's Ark Processors has created 375 jobs in the Hastings area and proudly operates as the only kosher beef processing facility in the United States that delivers beef to Israel. With operations running at peak efficiency, they process 520 cattle per day, utilizing their full capacity across an 8,700-square-foot harvest floor and 13,747-square-foot cooler space.

Noah's Ark Processors and WR Reserve are the same business entity that work in perfect harmony, maximizing production and ensuring zero waste. Noah's Ark Processors, the kosher division, exclusively uses the front cuts of beef to comply with Jewish law, with 30% of the total beef processed at Noah's Ark Processors qualifying as kosher. To uphold the highest standards, they employ approximately 60 Rabbis, with 19-20 in the facility during a given day, who meticulously inspect each piece of beef, ensuring that all ritualistic practices are followed and delivering premium quality beef to the Jewish community. Meanwhile, Noah's Ark Processors' DBA, WR Reserve, specializes in the hind cuts and whole beef, which are carefully inspected and processed to provide premium beef to the non-Jewish community. The facility prevents contamination, with separate hanging racks in the coolers and a separate fabrication floor exclusively for kosher beef.

Noah's Ark Processors also prioritizes finding quality beef from local producers. Their beef is USDA certified and comes from local ranchers primarily in a 200-mile radius of the Hastings area. As of November 2024, they currently service 257 cattle producers, most of those being in Nebraska and South Dakota with a few based out of Colorado, Kansas, and Iowa.

In 2016, Noah's Ark Processors took a significant step toward expansion by broadening their market reach. They secured an exclusive deal to ship their kosher beef to Israel, becoming the only processor in the United States to do so. Kathy Freeman, Office Manager at Noah's Ark Processors, shared insights into how this groundbreaking deal was made: "Our CEO, Fischel Ziegelheim, has a lot of relation and ties to Israel...our three owners are in Israel regularly. The Jewish community's relationships are personal and driven by trust that would make it hard for an outsider to get in and forge those relationships." Kathy Freeman also highlighted that the deal has not only been an excellent way to market the company and confirm demand but has also proven highly beneficial for fostering foreign trade and strengthening national relations. Noah's Ark Processors also ships

premium beef to Japan, Korea, Singapore, Canada, Egypt, Taiwan, Saudi Arabia, Malaysia, and Mexico. In November of 2024 Noah's Ark Processors exported as much as 3 million pounds of beef. Since 2019 it has been a pointed goal that it was time for the facility to expand.

Kathy Freeman stated, "During the pandemic while a lot of processors fell off, we were able to keep up and saw the demand and the ability to meet that demand. "Joel Freeman, Maintenance Engineer, elaborated, "We've developed a really good team and our efficiency is at the point where if we don't expand then we are just were doing 520 cattle a day and going home." They explained that there is still unmet demand in the market, making growth the only viable way to capture that opportunity.

With the support of HEDC, CRA, City Development Services, Ridgeline, Queen City Development, Governor Pillen, and many more, WR Reserve turned their expansion plans into a reality in 2024. That year, they received \$10 million through the USDA Meat and Poultry Processing Expansion Program Phase 2. Additionally, they were awarded a \$1 million Community Development Block Grant from the Nebraska Department of Economic Development to help offset the over \$55 million cost of their expansion.

The facility's primary expansion will focus on the harvest floor and cooler areas. The current 8,700-square-foot harvest floor will grow to 13,800 square feet, while the cooler space, currently at 13,747 square feet, will expand by an additional 15,000 square feet. This significant expansion will enable them to increase processing capacity from 520 head per day to 1,200 head per day. Each phase of the expansion is expected to take 18 months to complete. The facility is currently in the process of establishing a new wastewater treatment facility and utilities building, after which the expansion of the harvest floor and cooler space will begin.

This expansion is set to deliver significant benefits to the Hastings community. Kathy Freeman also shared that the University of Nebraska-Lincoln conducted a feasibility study, estimating a \$500 million economic impact from the project with \$42.4 million economic impact within the first 5 years of expansion. This includes benefits for ranchers, current and new employees, tax revenue for the city, Hastings Utilities, among others. The expansion will create at least 40 new jobs at the facility, not including positions in administration or management, leaving room for further job growth in the future.

As Noah's Ark Processors looks to the future, Kathy Freeman commented, "I am most looking forward to being able to look back at all the hard work and know that we finally did it. And to see the first cattle go through the new floor." Joel Freeman also added, "There are a lot of things for me because I'm on the construction side. It's been different levels of success for me. We're seeing our waste treatment facility go up right now, the floor gets poured tomorrow... seeing things actually come into play has been really good."

It is truly a win for Noah's Ark Processors and the community of Hastings to see this project come to life. HEDC looks forward to the growth of Noah's Ark Processors as well as the economic impact and opportunity that this project will have on the entirety of Hastings.