Beef to School

*Bear Paw Meats, Chinook, Montana*

*Adapted from Mooooving Forward Together: Strategies for Montana Beef to School*

**Meet the Farmer**

Owners Karla and Dexter Buck operate Bear Paw Meats along with several of their children. The operation is a state-inspected facility, allowing its products to be sold to practically any buyer within the state of Montana. Bear Paw Meats is a family-owned, vertically integrated cattle, feeding, auction, processing, and retail meat enterprise serving the central Hi-Line region of Montana. Vertical integration means that the company owns and operates the supply chain for the final product (they produce feed, ranch cattle, and processed meat). With a background in agriculture, the Buck family purchased Bear Paw Meats in 2006.

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**About Bear Paw Meats**

- Bear Paw Meats
- Chinook, Montana
- Vertically integrated cattle, feeding, auction, processing, and retail meat enterprise
- Markets: restaurants, schools, farmers markets, retail
- [bearpawmeats.com](http://bearpawmeats.com)

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**A Vertically Integrated Operation**

The Bucks and their family members operate in all levels of the beef supply chain, including feed production, processing, and distribution. Bear Paw meats sells to restaurants, schools, and individuals. At the processing plant in Chinook, customers can stop in and purchase a wide variety of beef products. For larger accounts such as businesses or institutions, Bear Paw delivers the order directly to the customer’s location. Throughout the summer, Bear Paw Meats also sells its products at farmers markets. Additionally, Bear Paw Livestock Commission Company, the family’s auction enterprise, holds cattle auctions every Friday and occasional special sales. Additional farming operations are devoted to raising crops that are used as feed for animals in Bear Paw’s small feedlot.

**Quality Beef to Schools**

Since 2008, Bear Paw Meats has been selling products to K-12 schools in the region, for use in the school lunch program. Each year, Bear Paw Meats tries to expand its beef-to-school program by adding another school. Schools primarily utilize Bear Paw Meats’ ground beef in their menu offerings. Items like tacos, lasagna, sloppy joes, hamburgers, spaghetti, and a variety of casseroles are regulars on school menus. Some schools that work with Bear Paw Meats will also purchase other cuts to make roast beef in addition to ground hamburger. Selling beef to schools has also opened the door for Bear Paw to sell pork sausages to schools for their breakfast programs.

Bear Paw Meats began selling to schools after the Bucks observed that the quality of their beef was higher than what was being sold at schools. The Bucks believe that the quality of the burger comes from what the cattle are fed. With their vertically integrated operation, they are able to control feed and create a consistent product for school lunchrooms and all of their customers. One advantage of their product is that it is easier to track the beef sold through...
Bear Paw Meats than by large distributors. Many parents like being informed about the nutrition of what is being served in the school cafeteria, and Bear Paw can provide that information. Karla also pointed out that they finish (or fatten) their animals on a fairly consistent ration of local feeds, primarily barley, silage corn, and alfalfa hay. This helps them produce a product that has a very consistent nutritional profile from one animal to the next. The meat processed through the business does not have fillers such as soymeal, lentils, or ice chips added and is 86 to 88% lean.

Bear Paw Meats delivers orders to schools on a regular schedule. Customers place their phone orders and receive weekly or bi-weekly deliveries. There are several factors that Bear Paw Meats has considered when maintaining a beef-to-school program. With regard to food safety, Bar Paw Meats follows guidelines for state-inspected facilities and safe delivery practices for every customer. As such, the business did not need to modify its food safety practices specifically for schools. Working with schools has required that the business stay informed about nutrition guidelines for protein in the National School Breakfast and Lunch Programs. Most of the schools that Bear Paw Meats works with have enough storage space to receive beef every other week, but it has marketed beef to other schools that require deliveries once per week. To process ground beef for schools, the operation purchased a new grinder. Bear Paw Meats markets its beef-to-school program directly to schools. In the future, the company plans to provide information in its advertisements about involvement with beef to school.

**The Future of Bear Paw Meats and Beef to School**

Supporting a beef-to-school program takes time on behalf of Bear Paw Meats to educate school food services how to set up orders and deliveries with a new and smaller business and how to use raw and local beef products in the kitchen. The business found that some communities are more supportive than others of local beef and farm to school products in general. Consequently, the business looks to educate consumers about the many benefits of local beef. In some schools, students are aware that the beef in their lunch is provided by a local animal, processed in a local processing facility, and delivered by a local company to them. Bear Paw Meats sees community support as key to growing beef-to-school programming in the future. For example, Karla suggests that parents advocate for local food products to school board officials, in order to increase the use of Montana foods in Montana lunchrooms.