Montana Beef to School: Five Profiles

Montana is home to 2.5 million cows – more than twice the number of human residents. There are also nearly 30 state or federally inspected meat-processing facilities in Montana, which provide a great opportunity for a portion of those cattle to be finished in-state and sold to local markets. More than a dozen Montana schools are taking advantage of these resources by purchasing local beef for school cafeterias. This practice has the potential to increase kids' understanding of Montana's ranching heritage and where their food comes from, while also providing economic support for local ranchers, meat processors, and agricultural communities. Read on to learn about the various methods of beef to school efforts that are bringing Montana beef to Montana kids.

Greenfield Elementary School

- **Number of Students:** 73
- **Source of Local Beef:** Broken Spoke Ranch, processed at Vaughn Meat Packing Inc.
- **Beef Product:** ground beef

Salley Young, Food Service Director at Greenfield Elementary School in Fairfield, is proud to offer beef from nearby Broken Spoke Ranch in her school district’s cafeteria. The ranch also provides beef to six other schools in the area. The meat is processed into ground beef at Vaughn Meat Packing Inc., which is a state-licensed processing facility located 11 miles from the ranch. Young serves the ground beef in sloppy joes, meatloaf, goulash, and enchiladas. Young loves serving the local beef because “the product is just so much better.”

Greenfield School received a National Farm to School grant of $1,000 two years ago and was able to purchase a new freezer to help with storage of locally sourced foods. The community, including school board members and parents, celebrated with a prime rib dinner prepared with all local food. According to Young, “It doesn’t have to be a battle to get local beef into your school, and it’s not more expensive than buying it from a broadline distributor.”

Kalispell Public Schools

- **Number of Students:** 6,000
- **Source of Local Beef:** Lower Valley Processing, White's Wholesale Meats, Mission Mountain Food Enterprise Center (MMFEC), and occasionally Winebark's
- **Beef Product:** raw ground beef, beef patties, beef-lentil crumble from MMFEC, beef tomato sauce and beef Mexican tomato sauce from MMFEC, Polish sausages (beef-pork blend)

Kalispell Public Schools Food Service Director Jenny Montague believes that bringing Montana beef to Montana children is safer, healthier, and more delicious than conventionally sourced beef. Kalispell serves local beef regularly, whether in burgers, beef crumble for tacos, lentil-beef crumble, chili, or as local beef and pork sausages. The district’s local beef purchases total more than 12,000 pounds each year.

Kalispell schools educate about local beef by using signs in the cafeterias. They are developing a “Harvest of the Month” program that will feature local beef in March as well as offer taste tests and cooking classes to educate students about local beef. After overcoming the challenges of processing to comply with USDA specifications, coordinating distribution, and sizing portions correctly, Kalispell now includes local beef purchases as part of their regular food orders and is able to meet budget needs while doing so.
Corvallis School District

- **Number of Students:** 700
- **Source of Local Beef:** local rancher, processed at Hamilton Packing Company
- **Beef Product:** ground beef

Corvallis School District Food Service Director Kathy Martin purchases beef from a local rancher because of the sense of community it brings. She comments that, “We are all in this together. Schools are the heart of the community, so if we can support the community, it is a great relationship.” Martin considers herself fortunate to work at a school that is located 5 miles from Hamilton Packing Company, a state-licensed processing facility, which means distribution is not a barrier. Dishes at the school that use the local ground beef include tacos, spaghetti, chili, and nachos. Sometimes Martin supplements the ground beef with lentils for added nutrition. Martin finds it satisfying to keep food local and support taxpayers in the school district while serving a quality product to students. The challenge for Martin is her budget. “It’s hard to know at what point the dollars and cents outweigh our preference to buy local,” she says. “I have to be prudent with food service dollars.”

Somers Lakeside Montana School District

- **Number of Students:** 590
- **Source of Local Beef:** White’s Wholesale Meats and Lower Valley Processing
- **Beef Product:** burger patties, ground beef

After schools’ commodity beef was recalled in 2006, Robin Vogler, the Somers Lakeside Food Service Director and Wellness Program Coordinator, was motivated to reduce food safety risks by moving toward purchasing more local beef. She also wanted to support local farmers, reduce emissions from transporting food, and connect kids to the economy of ranching all around them. She asks, “Why would you buy beef that was shipped 1,500 miles when you can get beef that is raised right down the road? It is a beautiful product.” Somers purchases local beef from White’s Wholesale Meats and from Lower Valley Processing. Vogler cites cost as the biggest challenge to serving local beef, while working with the processors has been easy. The school purchases the beef raw and uses it in tacos, burgers, lasagna, and stews. Vogler supplements the ground beef with pureed lentils purchased from the Western Montana Growers Cooperative in some recipes – such as taco filling – to keep the protein content high, add fiber, and reduce costs. Vogler says that this stretching technique is one of the ways she makes purchasing local beef work for her. She may also add sweet potatoes or yams to a meat sauce to make the beef go further.

Ennis Schools

- **Number of Students:** 350
- **Source of Local Beef:** Montana Meat Co.
- **Beef Product:** grass-fed julienned strips

The Ennis school district has worked with Montana Meat Co. to serve julienned strips of local beef for beef stroganoff. The school also held a taste test of local burger patties during the 2013-2014 school year and received positive feedback from both students and staff.

When the school features local beef for lunch, it is highlighted on the menu, and the cafeteria displays signs to notify teachers and students that they will be eating local beef that day. The school brings ranchers into the classroom to educate students about the Montana beef industry. These visits have generated conversation within administration and the community at large about the economic and environmental value of local beef and how to get more of it served in the school. The district is purchasing the julienned beef strips regularly, and school officials hope to expand the effort to local beef patties.

Information for this publication was collected through a survey done in April of 2014. For more information regarding beef to school efforts in Montana, please contact the Farm to Cafeteria Network via our website at farmtocafeteria.ncat.org or by emailing healthyfoodmt@ncat.org.