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Red Deer Advocate

Area meat-packing plants prepare product for Muslim community

By Harley Richards - Red Deer Advocate

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Muslims may not figure prominently into the demographics of Central Alberta, but a pair of meat processing plants here have adjusted their operations to serve that market.

Sunterra Meats Ltd. in Innisfail and Canadian Premium Meats Inc. in Lacombe have both obtained halal certification, approval that allows their meat products to be consumed by devout Muslims.

Sunterra Meats was certified in July by the Islamic Society of North America to slaughter and process beef, lamb, bison and goat.

“We worked on this for about a year,” said Miles Kliner, general manager at Sunterra Meats.

Slight physical changes in the plant were required, he said, but because Sunterra Meats is a specialty meat processor with strict segregation requirements, the transition wasn’t difficult.

Canadian Premium Meats became halal-approved last fall, also by the Islamic Society of North America. It’s now able to slaughter and process bison, beef and elk for Muslim consumption.

“It took some time,” said Werner Siegrist, a partner in Canadian Premium Meats.

But he agreed with Kliner that the required changes weren’t significant, particularly given the specialized nature of Canadian Premium Meats’ operations.

A key difference in halal processing is the method of slaughter, which must be performed in accordance with Muslim ritual and by someone certified to do so.

“The physical slaughter is really the key,” said Kliner.

Both Sunterra Meats and Canadian Premium Meats have been bringing in an authorized person to perform their halal slaughters.

Thereafter, the meat must be carefully segregated from other species and non-halal products, said Siegrist.

Sunterra Meats plans to export beef to Muslim markets in the Middle East and Indonesia, with other species likely to go abroad as well. It also sees good opportunities for halal lamb on the domestic market, as well as for bison and goat.

“We have a very significant Muslim population right here in Canada and North America,” said Kliner. “We fully plan to tap into that market to the best extent that we can.

“International markets will take a little bit of time to develop, but we’ve been very encouraged by the feedback we’ve gotten in several areas.”

The export market is one that Canadian Premium Meats — which does only custom processing for clients — expects to focus on.

“Eventually, I believe there is going to be a good market for us,” said Siegrist. “We’re going to see a number of animals brought here for halal slaughter and then they’ll go overseas.”

Canadian Premium Meats is among seven Alberta companies involved in an initiative to ship halal products to the Middle East and North Africa.

Operating as Prairie Halal Foods Inc., the partnership plans to sell halal meat to luxury hotels in the region.

“You can’t go into a Muslim country without halal certified product,” explained Christoph Weder, president and CEO of Prairie Halal Foods.

Dealing in several species of animal, Prairie Halal Foods has already shipped product to prospective customers for review.

“We anticipate our first order of product is going to be going by September,” said Weder, adding that he also sees opportunities for Prairie Halal Foods on the domestic market.

Gordon Cove, who heads Alberta Agriculture and Rural Development’s livestock products branch in Red Deer, said halal processing was a little-known niche market just a few years ago.

“We didn’t even have numbers on it, it was that small.”

But with the growing number of Muslims in North America and the increasing affluence of Muslims worldwide, the market is attracting attention.

Cove said Sunterra Meats and Canadian Premium Meats are well-positioned to pursue this opportunity because they are federally inspected and set up for segregated processing — unlike big packing plants.

“They have the ability to be quite adaptive.”

Cove added that halal processing is a “perfect example” of the direction the province is encouraging Alberta’s meat industry to go.

“It’s new markets and having an attribute or certification process differentiates you from other people.”

Another good example of niche marketing involves sales of meat products to Europe, said Cove.

Sunterra Meats and Canadian Premium Meats both have European Union certification.

Pursuing the halal and EU markets just made good sense to Sunterra Meats, said Kliner.

“It fits with our long-term strategy to be positioning ourselves in markets that are unique, that are niche-based, that are specialty-based.”

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