

# EXPLORING THE MEAT INDUSTRY IN PUERTO RICO

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## I. OBJECTIVES

The purpose of this qualitative research study was to explore the perceptions of the meat industry in Puerto Rico. The first of its kind, necessary questions served as the initial step in an attempt to understand the current situation of the meat industry, primarily focusing on beef.

## II. MATERIALS AND METHODS

Thirty semi-structured interviews were conducted using a validated group of experts involved in the beef industry over a 3-month time frame. Experts included professionals ( $n=7$ ), extensionists ( $n=17$ ), and beef producers ( $n=6$ ).

## III. RESULTS

Through thematic analysis, 4 themes were identified: (1) quality of meat, (2) priorities in the meat industry, (3) support needed, and (4) disconnect between consumers and educators. (1) Perceptions of meat quality varied greatly among professionals and beef producers. Professionals believe marbling was a key factor for quality. Extensionists and beef producers related quality with local products, animal welfare, low-fat content, tenderness, and grass-fed. Interestingly, a slaughterhouse professional did not consider meat color as a quality factor. (2) Priorities items differed among groups starting with hobby farmers struggling to compete with dairy cattle, the largest sector, as others focused on higher-quality forages necessary to improve meat quality (external fat) to providing a fresh product and food security. (3) With experts and resources lacking, slaughterhouses and number of cattle are not comparable. On the other hand, a participant believed the support needed is that “[the industry should] modify how beef is being marketed to better benefit the producers.” According to another participant, support for producers is limited and “communication is mostly supported by phone calls.” (4) Several interviewees believe that the government should educate consumers, increasing interest in local Puerto Rican beef production and meat consumption. From the professionals perspective, producers are financially impacted because slaughterhouses can set their own prices without using a standard base price; therefore, beef producers struggle to grow. A professionals comment included that “everyone [professionals, extensionists, and beef producers] is too focused on their side of the business. There is a lack of communication with consumers who maintain their interest in low prices.”

## IV. CONCLUSION

This research shows that the meat industry of Puerto Rico has significant opportunities for growth. The disconnect, and varying levels of knowledge and awareness, between groups

hinders the meat industry, overall. Better communication, education, and teamwork is necessary to assist in strengthening the needs of Puerto Rico. Further studies are recommended to better understand the major voids of existing gaps. Identifying the definition of "quality" should be an initial priority in order to keep a goal (RMT1) in promoting consumer desired meat products economically benefiting Puerto Rico as whole.

Keywords: beef, consumer perception, meat industry, Puerto Rico