

## **35th Annual Montana Meat Processor Convention brings large crowds to Big Timber**

Around 200 meat processors from across Montana, North Dakota, South Dakota, Wyoming, Idaho, Washington and Oregon made their way to Big Timber last week for the 35th annual Montana Meat Processors Association (MMPA) convention, hosted by Brian Engle and his crew at Pioneer Meats and Meats of Montana. Every year MMPA holds a convention where meat processors can come together to share different ideas, techniques and knowledge about their industry.

MMPA is a community for meat processors where they can acquire knowledge and regulation awareness while promoting profitable connections and economic advancement. ***“We are progressive processors coming together to share ideas, techniques and knowledge,”*** Engle said. ***“Our goal is to improve our products, better serve our communities and promote the small processing industry.”*** This year saw 44 processing plants, 17 of those being new members of MMPA, enjoying a three-day event packed full of different activities, entertainment, tours, seminars, a cured meat competition, as well as a chance to meet with meat processing vendors from all around the United States.

Attendees of the convention had the option to enter some of their products into the cured meats competition. There were 236 different entries of cured meats that competed in 19 different categories. One of the awards Engle won was for his pork pastrami in the innovative pork category. Daniel’s Gourmet Meats & Sausage out of Bozeman was the overall grand champion. The convention wasn’t just a chance for meat processors to learn new things; it also included a lot of different fun activities for participants to take part in. There was karaoke, a pub and putt, cornhole, a pig roast and live music to name a few. On Thursday individuals had the chance to watch a processing demonstration on emulsification and smoked sausage by Cured Meats Hall of Fame member, Jon Frohling and the crew at Pioneer Meats. ***“John is renowned for his smoked sausages,”*** Engle said. ***“We were lucky to have him here to share some of his knowledge on different techniques with smoking.”***

Thursday was also the day that attendees got the chance to tour both B Bar Compost and Shiloh Rifle Company. B Bar Compost is a local ranch that uses the offal from Pioneer Meats in their compost. Production Manager Mihail Kennedy, along with his brother Shea, showed individuals how they make their compost that they will put back onto the ranch to help promote soil health. Shiloh Rifle owner Kirk Bryan gave tours through his plant and showed people how they manufacture the famous 1874 Sharps rifle.

During the convention, participants had access to classes dealing with humane handling, food safety, marketing, human resources, employee retention and meat processing. The Executive Director of the American Association of Meat Processors Chris Young was the featured speaker at the banquet and awards ceremony. Dwight Ely, the president of the American Association of Meat Processors, made the trip from his farm in Pennsylvania to attend the convention. ***“This has been a great opportunity for me to be able to come and see Brian’s operation and***

*what this association is doing,” Ely said. “This has been unbelievable, Brian really did a great job of getting everybody together to learn different techniques. We have seen all different levels of associations and Montana’s is one of the top...they are so energetic.”*

On Friday and Saturday, the pavilion at the fairgrounds was packed full of 36 meat-processing vendors from around the country. Paul Furey, a vendor from Con Yeager Spice Company out of PA, was onsite to talk about his company’s different high-quality products and services in spice distribution and seasoning. *“This has been pretty cool,” Furey said. “There has been a lot of fun things for us to do...Brian really put together a fun packed schedule.”*

Another vendor who made the trek from California was Armando Ayala, the Regional Sales Manager for Ross Industries. Ross Industries has built an international reputation as the engineer, manufacturer, and marketer of the world’s finest food processing and packaging systems. All Ross systems are designed to help processors streamline their food manufacturing and packaging functions to improve quality, productivity and food safety while minimizing waste. *“There has been a lot of people here for this convention,” Ayala said. “There are a lot of suppliers here, which I am very surprised about...I have not seen this many before, the most I have seen was 17.”*

Miles Community College Agriculture Instructor Kimberly Gibbs and Meat Processing Coordinator Tina Rutledge attended the convention to talk about their Certificate of Applied Science for meat processing. *“Brian has been instrumental in getting this program off the ground,” Rutledge said. “Right now we have three students who will be graduating with their Certificate of Applied Science and two of them are currently interning with Brian.”* The one-year program was designed to increase the skilled labor force for the meat processing businesses in Montana. The program design is unique as it allows students to network with meat processors in the state and provides hands-on learning that is critical for career and technical programs. *“Jordan Hutchins and Erin Wilson are interning here right now,” Engle said. “Our association awarded each of those individuals an additional \$2000 scholarship to help recover some of their costs.”*

One of the attendees was Matt Feldtman, owner of Matt’s Old Fashioned Butcher Shop & Deli in Livingston. Feldtman didn’t have any cured meat entries but still came down to enjoy the three-day event. *“Brian, Kary and their staff put a lot of time and effort into this one (convention),” Feldtman said. “Everything was top notch, from the seminars, entertainment and food...it was definitely one of the best conventions and a great time was had by all.”*

According to Engle, the convention would not have been the huge success it was without the support of all the different local businesses throughout town. *“We couldn’t have done this without the support of the different businesses in the community,” Engle said. “We wanted to make it an over the top presentation and I think we achieved that.”*

The next MMPA convention will be held next year in Billings, MT.