

Cooperative Unit Systems: 1. Introduction and Raising Market Animals in a Group Setting¹

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Purpose

Traditionally, organizations such as 4-H have encouraged youth to participate in market animal projects as a way of increasing youth participation and introducing youth to production agriculture. As the demographics shift to a more urban clientele base for 4-H, there are new barriers of entry to market animal projects that were not seen in generations past. To address these barriers of entry, systems such as cooperative animal units have been set up. Throughout Florida, cooperative unit systems have been utilized to alleviate the demand of resources, time, and knowledge on individual participants.

A cooperative animal unit system can be utilized to introduce youth to market animal production, while distributing the daily demands of raising an animal project as an individual. The primary target audience consists of youth who:

1. Do not have access to appropriate facilities
2. Lack the resources and time needed to raise a project individually
3. Lack the knowledge of swine production to safely and effectively raise their project animal

The aim of a cooperative unit system is to expose youth to animal production, ensure a safe environment for both

participants and their project animals, maximize learning opportunities, and lower the barriers of entry for interested youth. Cooperative unit participants often share the same project start date and end date, as part of a terminal live-stock show. Each cooperative group, or unit, will develop specific parameters to meet the needs of its participants along the way. As a result, each unit is unique and adaptable to the needs of its users.

Components

The components of each cooperative unit will differ based on the needs of its participants and depending on the level of involvement the leaders are willing to take on. A cooperative market animal unit program is based on the core concept that youth will share the responsibilities of the day-to-day, hands-on experience component of the project. For the purposes of this document, an animal project has been broken into three components to be used as the basis for a cooperative unit:

- Hands-on experience
- Trainings and workshops
- Demonstration of the skills and knowledge acquired through the animal project experience
 - Project and/or Record books
 - Demonstrations or other speaking opportunities
 - Livestock shows

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- One terminal/market show/sale to conclude the project

4-H volunteers may select the components they will implement to best fit each unit's needs. The three components are designed to give youth quality experiences with their market swine projects while also building their knowledge. Throughout the project, youth will utilize the hands-on skills and knowledge developed through educational clinics that complement their weekly hands-on experiences for all animals housed in the cooperative unit. In addition, youth are responsible for preparing their own project animal for the market show. The final component is participation in exhibitions or prospect shows, with the final show being a terminal or market show to which the swine project is entered.

Limitations

Each unit will be unique, because no situation is the same. As such, this and subsequent documents in the cooperative unit series are designed to assist with the replication of a cooperative unit. This does not mean that the documents must be used in their entirety. When determining the use of this guide, take into consideration factors such as available facilities, volunteer and youth experience levels, volunteer involvement levels, and unit purpose. While the cooperative system is designed to lighten the demands of raising a market project animal, each youth is expected to participate in the distributed responsibilities and is responsible for the total costs of raising their animal. Critical decisions must be made in organizing a cooperative unit. It is highly recommended that all participants are involved in the process or that the expectations are clearly outlined in a written agreement acknowledged by each participant.

Communication

One of the key elements to the success of any group is communication. Communication among cooperative unit participants is extremely important because many participants will not see each other during the day-to-day operation. A unified system of virtual communication is essential to the success of a cooperative unit. There are many methods that can be utilized to communicate with unit participants, including texting, emailing, or social media. Phone applications such as WhatsApp and Messenger may also serve as communication tools. A virtual method should be established to form a more fluid line of communication. The key is to select a method that everyone is able to utilize and check with regularity, and that is in compliance with youth protection standards (Office of Youth and Children's Services). Furthermore, having participants' contact information readily available at the physical unit

location and being virtually available for all participants are of great importance.

For more information on risk management, consult EDIS document 4H10.5, *Risk Management for 4-H Youth Development Work: Insurance* (<https://edis.ifas.ufl.edu/4h296>).

Conclusion

Each cooperative unit should be designed to fit the needs of the participants. Furthermore, the primary objective of this series is to act as a suggested roadmap when organizing a cooperative unit. The cooperative unit is a way to address barriers of entry into the market animal projects in 4-H. This series may be used in part or in its entirety to assist as needed. Resources such as the standard operating procedures and forms in this series may at times be unit-specific, but may serve as a guide to creating a set to fit each unit. This guide was developed to complement resources such as The Ohio State University Animal Learning Lab Kits and the Purdue Extension Ethics Training Online Modules. The cooperative unit system is utilized to distribute the daily demands of a market animal project; however, it operates best when each youth is highly involved. Although the daily chores are covered, it is still the individual's responsibility to ensure that their project animal is progressing at the appropriate pace and is ready to show by making sure the animal is well trained and groomed. The success of the individual is still completely reliant on that individual's dedication and involvement in the project.

***Please note that this publication does not include recommendations for pandemics such as COVID-19. Federal and state guidelines during times of crisis should always supersede the recommendations provided in this document.**

References

- Ohio 4-H Youth Development. (n.d.). Learning Lab Kits and Related Products. Retrieved from <https://ohio4h.org/books-and-resources/learning-lab-kits>
- Purdue Extension. (n.d.). About 4-H. Retrieved from <https://extension.purdue.edu/4h/Pages/Online-Animal-Ethics-Program.aspx>