

# Cooperative Unit Systems: 2. Organizational Strategies<sup>1</sup>

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## Introduction

Cooperative swine units employ different organizational strategies that allow for the management of the unit. This document builds upon the previous EDIS publication, *Cooperative Unit Systems: 1. Introduction and Raising Market Animals in a Group Setting*, which explains the purpose and goals of these systems. This document will introduce the core requirements for replicating a cooperative animal unit. Specifically, this publication will introduce organizational considerations for a cooperative unit from a 4-H agent's perspective. It is highly recommended that a veterinarian or adult who is familiar with available facilities, species health, and care needs assist in the setup of each unit. The document may serve as a roadmap for cooperative animal units, but it does NOT supersede the guidelines outlined by the county or state 4-H office.

## Program Parameters

A successful cooperative unit will require the supervising adults to promote all participants' understanding by outlining and providing written expectations and offerings of the program. The leaders are also expected to provide an orientation to the youths that outlines all program parameters before any animals are moved into the cooperative group setting. To ensure timely acknowledgment and understanding of the program as well as adherence to the parameters, it is recommended all youth and their parents/guardians sign a copy of the parameters. The parameters of each cooperative animal unit will vary, based on species and participant needs. Appendix A provides a Cooperative

Unit Checklist to assist in the defining of the program parameters. The main parameters that should be considered when organizing a cooperative unit are:

- Roles and responsibilities
- Scheduling
- Finances
- Training system
- Risk management
- Facilities
- Standard operating procedures
- Trainings and workshops

Each of the five topics above covers a cornerstone of setting up a successful cooperative animal unit and should be considered with the input of the county 4-H faculty or staff. Although the details and specifications are specific to each individual unit, the topics provide the basis for understanding the functionality of a cooperative animal unit.

## Youth and Adult Roles

The adult and youth partnership is the basis of 4-H programming and is essential for the success of a cooperative swine unit. It is possible to organize a cooperative unit with as few as two families, but it is far less burdensome with more families. However, too many families can also create an environment in which the youths do not feel any responsibility for their projects. The unit coordinator and the 4-H agent or advisor should take these scenarios into account.

1. This document is 4HASL51, one of a series of the 4-H Youth Development Program, UF/IFAS Extension. Original publication date August 2020. Revised December 2023. Visit the EDIS website at <https://edis.ifas.ufl.edu> for the currently supported version of this publication.

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The participants should clearly understand their roles and the roles of others in the cooperative unit system. Table 1 outlines the different types of shifts that adult and youth participants will be expected to fill for the duration of the project. A schedule should be created based on participant availability, assigning shifts to each youth and family participant. Shifts may be assigned by youth participant or by family depending on the needs of each unit. Furthermore, it is not necessary to schedule practice shifts, but it is advised to have participants dedicate two to three shifts to working with their individual animals.

Table 1. Shifts and expectations for cooperative units.

Shift	Expectations
Chores	Feed, clean pens, perform daily tasks for the unit
Practice with your animal	Youths work with their specific animals on showmanship and grooming

Assigning roles and outlining expectations will allow adult and youth participants to be informed and aware of the needs of the unit. By standardizing the expectations of each role, participants are able to fill in for one another in the event of an emergency. Table 2 outlines the roles and expectations.

## Scheduling

When scheduling shifts, the coordinator should determine the ideal number of youths involved based on the needs of the program. The first decision should be how many shifts per day the unit will need to cover the workload. A cooperative unit often chooses to have one or two chore shifts per day. A schedule with two chore shifts a day would include one assignment in the morning and one in the afternoon, whereas a schedule with one chore shift a day would have only one assignment in the morning or evening close to the same time each day. This depends on the unit coordinator's and the 4-H agent's or advisor's preference. It is possible to schedule more than two chore shifts per day, but this guide does not provide guidelines beyond two chore shifts a day.

Keep in mind that families with multiple youths will likely want their youths to be assigned to the same shift, so the parents do not have to make multiple trips. Clearly outlining the expectations for families with multiple youths is extremely important to avoid disproportionate assignments. Scenarios such as this may increase the number of youths who may be accepted into the cooperative unit, if the unit operates under the rule of one family per day. Another possibility is that each youth participating in the project is

responsible for one chore assignment. This may mean that a family with three children/participants will be required to work three chore shifts per week.

For more information on role assignments and scheduling, see Appendix B: Cooperative Unit Systems: Role Assignments List, and Appendix C: Cooperative Unit Systems: Scheduling Matrix.

## Cooperative Unit Finances

One of the more nuanced decisions is how to distribute the cost for each participant involved in a cooperative unit. When animals share a pen or housing unit, it is not always possible to determine the amount of resources each animal uses. There are various methods by which the costs can be distributed among participants. The communal resources such as water and electricity can be split equally among all the participants. Resources such as shavings and feed are more equally dispersed on a pen-by-pen basis. By tracking each pen and the resources put into each pen, participants are sharing costs for a more personalized group. Furthermore, this allows for a pen-by-pen personalized feeding system to maximize project animal growth, given the animals are appropriately penned according to size and nutritional needs.

To cover the upfront costs of a cooperative unit such as feed and shavings, the unit coordinator could ask for a deposit, or send participants an invoice after the fact. If a unit chooses to request a deposit, each participant should receive a copy of the receipt. Furthermore, if the unit decides to invoice, a formal organizational invoice should be drafted for each participant listing a description, quantity, and cost for each item purchased. It is imperative that both the collection and handling of money are conducted in accordance with the county and state organization guidelines.

## Training System\*

It is recommended that each unit set up a training system. This system should guide the determination of which participants are qualified to complete certain tasks for the cooperative unit, such as giving injections when needed. All participants should be aware of their status. Each cooperative unit should develop its own tiered training system to prepare participants for more complex tasks as they gain more experience. The higher the training level, the fewer participants are needed, although this is strictly dependent on the needs of each unit.

## Risk Management\*

Although many 4-H members are often covered under insurance paid with their annual membership fees, it is highly recommended that additional policies be taken out for cooperative unit projects. Traditionally, the 4-H organization uses American Income Life Company, which specifically offers 4-H youth and club policies (<https://www.aile.com/SpecialRiskDivision/4H-Extension>) to cover accidents. The first policy type is a club accident coverage, which ranges from one to two dollars per youth for a year's worth of coverage, with pricing depending on the activity type. These policies can be used to cover both adults and youth and are highly recommended for any cooperative group. Secondly, a policy specific to the animal is available, typically costing six percent of the value of the animal for one year. These policies are relatively inexpensive and serve as extra protection for all participants involved in a cooperative unit project.

For animal unit coordinators, additional liability coverage should be considered. In Florida, Farm Bureau offers personal liability policies for persons who oversee the management of animal operations. If the animal unit is located on personal property, it is recommended that you consult with your homeowner policy provider.

Furthermore, understanding and following your county and state youth protection policies is of the utmost importance. In Florida 4-H, at a minimum, all adult participants should have an active profile in 4honline (<https://www.4honline.com/>) and complete the Office of Youth and Children's Services Training and Quiz (<https://oycs.ufsa.ufl.edu/compliance/training>). Consult with your county UF/IFAS Extension office to determine additional training requirements and expectations. Every effort should be made to ensure that youths are always accompanied by their parents or guardians while at the cooperative unit at all times.

For more information on risk management, consult EDIS documents 4H10.5, *Risk Management for 4-H Youth Development Work: Insurance* (<https://edis.ifas.ufl.edu/4h296>), and AN321, *Risk Management for 4-H Youth Development Work: Large Animals—Livestock* (<https://edis.ifas.ufl.edu/an321>).

## Facilities\*

Facilities are one of the most common barriers for youth who want to participate in a market animal project. Existing livestock facilities can be modified to house a cooperative unit, or partnerships can be developed with the owner

or manager of livestock facilities (including on farms and fairgrounds) in the community. Considerations for facilities should include:

- Waste management systems
- Space requirements
- Electricity
- Weather protection

These four main considerations are covered in more depth in the *Cooperative Unit Systems: Swine Facilities* document. It is recommended to seek counsel sought from a veterinarian or swine health care expert in the unit's region. Each species has specific requirements. For more information on the facilities needs of each species, refer to the following documents in this series as they become available.

## Standard Operating Procedures and Forms\*

In order to accommodate the daily ebb and flow of a cooperative unit, standard operating procedures should be designed and made available to all participants. Standard operating procedures act as a step-by-step, highly detailed guide to completing a task at the cooperative unit. They serve as the basis and the standard that all participants need to achieve. These also enable every youth to feel competent in completing necessary tasks. The documents are designed to support the implemented training system. These are extremely helpful for tasks that may be performed sporadically or for youths who need the support.

## Trainings and Workshops

As with any new experience, a period of learning is necessary. Trainings on cooperative unit-specific details and knowledge-based workshops are a practical way to introduce newcomers to essential knowledge and skills to successfully complete a market animal project. Trainings that focus on unit-specific protocols serve many functions, but first and foremost, they serve as a baseline for outlining the expectations of the unit coordinator. It is up to the unit coordinator and their 4-H agent or advisor to select the training topics, but the following are recommended:

- Orientation and expectations
- Standard operating procedures and forms
- Daily swine health and care

Organizing and offering workshops for participants of the cooperative unit allows each participant to maximize their

knowledge gain throughout their experience. By partnering with feed representatives, veterinarians, and community partners, the unit coordinator or the 4-H agent/advisor can arrange workshops with a core group of youth as the participants in the cooperative unit while also opening the experience to other youth. Topics of interest for workshops may include:

- Ethical conduct
- Nutrition
- Showmanship
- Health and care

The key to the success of a cooperative unit system is good communication. Trainings and workshops provide the essential base for understanding for all participants and allow youth engagement and peer-to-peer relationships to be formed. Every participant fills a role, and if all participants are not on the same page, the system will quickly deteriorate.

## Conclusion

The hands-on experience component of the cooperative unit is one of the most complex and time-consuming components. If the topics listed above are not carefully planned and clearly outlined for all participants, an ill-formed experience may result. A high level of organization is essential for the success of a cooperative unit. Although this series outlines various parts of a cooperative unit, each unit is different. Roles and materials may need to be developed to support the unit. The most important keys to a cooperative unit's success are clear and effective communication with all participants, and participant awareness of the various roles in the cooperative unit system.

**\*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. For the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's recommendations regarding livestock during the COVID-19 pandemic, please refer to their website: <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/animals/events-animal-activities.html>.**

## Resources

1. Appendix A: Cooperative Unit Systems: Cooperative Unit Setup Checklist

2. Appendix B: Cooperative Unit Systems: Role Assignments List
3. Appendix C: Cooperative Unit Systems: Scheduling Matrix

## Appendix A: Cooperative Unit Systems: Cooperative Unit Setup Checklist

1. Hands-on experience (chore shifts, etc.)

- Trainings and workshops
- Livestock show participation
- Record books
- Demonstration/speaking opportunities
- Livestock shows
- One terminal/market show to conclude the project

2. Methods of communication:

- Texting
- Calling
- Email
- Social media
- Other:

3. Visit the EDIS website at <https://edis.ifas.ufl.edu> for the currently supported version of this publication.

Project start date: \_\_\_\_\_ Project end date (terminal show): \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_ (# of days in the project) \_\_\_\_\_  
(# of weeks in the project)

4. How many chore shifts per day:

- 1 (morning or evening shift = 7 shifts per week)
- 2 (morning and evening shifts = 14 shifts per week)

5. Chore shifts are assigned by:

- Family (no matter the number of youth)
- Youth (each youth is assigned to their own shift)

6. Determine how many families or youth you would prefer to have in the cooperative unit given your responses to the two previous questions: \_\_\_\_\_

**\*For example:** If option 2 is selected (14 shifts per week), 14 families would be needed to work one shift per week, or 7 families would be needed to work 2 shifts per week.

Table 2. Roles and expectations for cooperative unit participants.

<b>Roles</b>	<b>Expectations and Responsibilities</b>
4-H agent/advisor	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Works with the unit coordinator to arrange facilities</li> <li>• Responsible for screening and appointing volunteers and parents according to organizational standards</li> <li>• Secures additional insurance for the unit</li> <li>• Acts as a resource for all parents and youths participating in the cooperative unit</li> </ul>
Unit coordinator	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Acts as the point of contact for all youths and adults housing animals at the unit</li> <li>• Coordinates and creates a schedule and assigns chore shifts</li> <li>• Sets a calendar for animals housed at the unit</li> <li>• Arranges for the procurement of materials needed for the project, such as stall mats, shavings, wheelbarrow, pitchfork, and heat lamps</li> </ul>
Training and workshop coordinator	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Works with the unit coordinator and the 4-H agent or advisor to schedule trainings and workshops</li> </ul>
Feed procurement	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Works with a local feed store to order feed requested by the participants, within reason</li> <li>• Arranges for the feed to delivered or picked up and moved to the animal unit location</li> <li>• Responsible for invoicing each youth for the feed costs</li> </ul>
Health advisor	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Local veterinarian with whom a working relationship is established</li> <li>• Species-specific expert qualified to advise</li> </ul>
Parent/Guardian	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Present at each shift to which their youth is assigned</li> <li>• Directs and assists in the completion of chore shifts</li> </ul>
Youth	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Completes tasks assigned as part of chore shifts</li> <li>• Works with their swine for show preparations</li> <li>• If unable to work a shift, secures a shift cover</li> </ul>

## Appendix B: Cooperative Unit Systems: Role Assignments List

Table 3. Role Assignments

Roles	Name	Contact Information
4-H agent/advisor		
Unit coordinator		
Trainings and workshops coordinator		
Feed procurement		
Health advisor		

Table 4. Parents/Guardians and Youth Participants' Shift Assignments

Youth Name	Parent/Guardian Name	Contact Information	Shift Assignments
			Chore: M T W Th F Sa Su Practice: M T W Th F Sa Su
			Chore: M T W Th F Sa Su Practice: M T W Th F Sa Su
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M = Monday, T = Tuesday, W = Wednesday, Th = Thursday, F = Friday, Sa = Saturday, and Su = Sunday



## Appendix C: Cooperative Unit Systems: Scheduling Matri

Table 5. *Scheduling Matrix—1 time a day chore shifts* \*Complete the matrix with the youth name, parent/guardian name, and contact information. Circle the days you would prefer to be assigned to each shift. Every participant must select at least \_\_ day(s) for chore shift(s) and \_\_\_\_ days for practice shifts.

Youth Name	Parent/Guardian Name	Contact Information	Preferred Shift Day Assignments
			Chore: M T W Th F Sa Su Practice: M T W Th F Sa Su
			Chore: M T W Th F Sa Su Practice: M T W Th F Sa Su
			Chore: M T W Th F Sa Su Practice: M T W Th F Sa Su
			Chore: M T W Th F Sa Su Practice: M T W Th F Sa Su
			Chore: M T W Th F Sa Su Practice: M T W Th F Sa Su
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			Chore: M T W Th F Sa Su Practice: M T W Th F Sa Su
			Chore: M T W Th F Sa Su Practice: M T W Th F Sa Su

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