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PHOTO BY DAVID GOTTSCHALK
Gardening expert P. Allen Smith (left) and Wes Ward, Arkansas' secretary of agriculture, talk with farmers about the challenges they face producing locally grown food at an event in Springdale.

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The local-food scene in Arkansas is growing, but small-scale producers are still struggling to make a profit as the infrastructure these producers need disappears, farmers say.

Nationally, food marketed as local can fetch higher prices on grocery store shelves. A pound of chicken breast costs an average of \$2.86, according to weekly U.S. Department of Agriculture retail reports. A pound of local chicken breast averages \$8.02.

But even with these higher prices, local producers are finding it difficult to increase margins.

Will Hanna, who pasture-raises heritage hogs in Benton County, told Wes Ward, Arkansas' secretary of agriculture, at a Local Conversations event in Springdale on Tuesday that there aren't enough USDA slaughterhouses or meat processors that cater to small-scale producers.

Ward, who heads up the Arkansas Agriculture Department, said the state is trying to promote locally produced food and that people are willing to spend more for products grown in Arkansas.

"It's a national and state trend for people who want to know more about where their food is coming from," he said. "It's very exciting to watch that happen."

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The "Arkansas Grown" label has grown about 30 percent in the last year, said P. Allen Smith, a Little Rock native and *Garden to Table* PBS host. The label is sponsored by the Arkansas Agriculture Department to help promote local agricultural products.

"The trend of choosing locally produced foods and goods is on the fast track to becoming mainstream," he said. "Now our job is to keep up the momentum."

Meat must be processed at a USDA-approved slaughterhouse to be sold commercially across state lines. Farmers also can use custom slaughterhouses to process animals, but large quantities of this meat cannot be labeled and sold.

"Places that will process a small farmer's poultry that are USDA are few and far between," said C.J. Sentell, production manager of Grass Roots Farmers' Cooperative, a small farm co-op. "It's a key piece of infrastructure that's missing from the local-food scene."

Fewer but larger federal slaughterhouses are now the norm. There are about 60 USDA-approved slaughter and processing facilities in Arkansas. More than half are owned by large state or national food corporations. At least 18 are owned by Tyson Foods.

Farmers can rent out slaughterhouses and processing facilities that belong to meat producers like Tyson or Simmons Foods, which also owns several facilities in the state. But Sentell said these facilities, which can process large numbers of animals, are too expensive for most small-scale farmers.

"We are just not that big, and don't want to be that big," he said.

Sentell said the number of small-scale processors shrank as big agriculture companies grew in the 1980s and 1990s. The number of USDA-approved slaughterhouses fell from more than 1,200 in 1990 to about 800 in 2010, according to a report by the USDA.

The USDA lists Arkansas as one of the areas where there is a lack of small slaughter facilities in relation to large numbers of small farms.

Hanna takes his hogs to Winslow, more than 50 miles and a one-hour drive from his farm in Benton County.

"It's hard to find a producer close enough to make it efficient," Hanna said.

Sentell said he travels to Missouri to get his birds slaughtered and processed.

"If farmers can't get that livestock processed, they are at a dead end," he said. "They can't even think about getting to market."

Deer season also is a hurdle for local producers trying to process their meat. The few butchers and processors that can accommodate small producers depend on hunters to bring in deer and turn a steady profit. During the winter and fall seasons, local producers can't compete with deer processing.

"The issue is sort of huge," Allen said. "It bottlenecks everything."

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