## Beef: It’s for School Lunch: Anna Tvedt, and Dr. Mendel Miller

## Season 1, Episode 47

[Intro music]

**Kiernan Brandt:**

Welcome to Cattle HQ, a podcast from industry experts and progressive producers discussing cutting edge info about the cow calf sector to keep cattlemen and women in the know and positively affect their bottom line.

**Madison Kovarna:**

Welcome to Cattle HQ, brought to you by South Dakota State University Extension. I am Madison Kovarna, a beef nutrition field specialist based out of Watertown, and joining me today are two very special guests, Anna Tvedt and Dr. Mendel Miller. Anna is a nutrition field specialist with SDSU Extension and provides nutrition expertise to South Dakotans through various initiatives and programs, one of those being Farm to School. Dr. Mendel Miller is the Assistant State Veterinarian with the South Dakota Animal Industry Board. He helps producers in the state manage and keep healthy livestock. Both Anna and Dr. Miller are joining me today to share some information about Beef to School, which is an offshoot of a program titled Farm to School that allows producers to feed students at local schools with locally raised beef. I am so glad that both of you took some time out of your days to join me to talk about this initiative here with this Beef to School. It’s something that I think is super cool for our communities in South Dakota to be a part of, but Anna, I’ll ask you first if you want to provide our listeners with some more maybe information about yourself and kind of introduce yourself a little bit further to them.

**Anna Tvedt:**

Sure, Madison. Well, it’s great to join you today, and I’m really excited to talk about this topic of Beef to School. My background is in nutrition and dietetics, so I love getting to work with you and those in the beef industry, but I think I started working with SDSU Extension in 2021, and Farm to School was my main program right away. So, for that beginning portion, just coming from the human nutrition world, I focused a lot on fruits and vegetables and still do a lot on fruits and vegetables, but really realized quickly that a strength that we have in South Dakota is beef production and schools wanting to use local beef in school meals, and that that’s a project that’s available basically year round, and that just in the fall or harvest seasons like fruits and vegetables. So, that’s a little bit about kind of the evolution of Farm to School and what’s led us to Beef to School, and really excited to share how that’s really taking off across South Dakota.

**Dr. Mendel Miller:**

Yes, thanks, Madison. As you said, I’m the Assistant State Veterinarian for South Dakota, and we do deal with livestock health across the state, but one of the other things that we do is we oversee, we have a state meat inspection program, and I am the director of that program, and I’ve been the director of the state meat inspection program since about 2009. So, just really excited to talk to about a great topic that benefits a lot of people across the state as both producers and as the children in the schools.

**Madison Kovarna:**

Absolutely. The both of you, I think, will offer some great conversation of kind of bouncing back and forth between the more logistical side on the meat inspection realm, and then also kind of how those schools can be involved in programs like this. Anna, you already hinted at some of these things, but could you give us some more insight to what Farm to School is and maybe more namely of how Beef to School falls into that realm and kind of what schools are doing with these?

**Anna Tvedt:**

Yes, absolutely. So, Farm to School is a concept we like to call it because it includes three different types of program areas that can be adapted in each school or local community that wants to implement any of these. So, what it’s not is a pre-scripted program with a set of principles that a school or a local area must follow in order to be considered Farm to School, but what it is, is a concept. So, those three elements of Farm to School are the first and foremost one that we would think of right away is serving locally grown and processed and distributed and et cetera foods in local child nutrition programs. So, those being school lunch, school breakfast, snack programs, afterschool programs, school maybe daycares or early childhood education programs. So, really anywhere that a child is getting food, we would consider a child nutrition program. So, getting local foods into those. The next would be school and youth food production, I like to call it. So, often in Farm to School, nationally, like I had mentioned, it does focus heavily on fruits and vegetables. So, these would be gardens that youth are involved in, but thinking in South Dakota too, right, that could include any type of animal husbandry as well, and then the third is educational program. So, leaning into classroom components or what can we teach in the cafeteria about the local foods that we’re eating. So, Beef to School really then is just a subset of those same concepts of Farm to School but focus specifically on getting local beef into the cafeteria, teaching kids about local beef production and possibly even giving them the opportunity to participate in that themselves.

**Madison Kovarna:**

I have always thought that this Beef to School, both the idea of getting beef into the lunchroom, but then also educating these youth on how beef are raised in our wonderful state of South Dakota I think is something that as these kids get more and more removed from the farm is just fantastic. I think a lot of kids can benefit from a program like this, even if they did grow up on a beef operation. It’s always fun for them to kind see the behind-the-scenes stuff and then also see the end product of the hard work. Dr. Miller, as coming off of what Anna just said about these livestock and these cattle are being used for school lunches for producers to participate, there are some stipulations with processing of beef to qualify for these type of concepts and programs, but what are some big ticket items that producers should keep in mind for their animals to qualify both on the hoof and then also in the meat?

**Dr. Mendel Miller:**

Yes, thanks. So, the main thing that is necessary, and there’s not necessarily a lot of prerequisites for on the hoof other than they have to be healthy animals, which everybody wants and expects and would deliver anyway, but that’s really the main requirement for on the hoof, and then the product itself, the beef itself needs to be slaughtered and processed under inspection. So, sometimes there’s some confusion and sometimes that’s a little complicated on what that actually means, but as a state meat inspection program that we have, that’s what we offer, one of the services we offer to small lockers and meat shops across the state in various locations. That is that we have inspectors that visit there on days that they ask to be inspected, and then our inspectors assure that that animal is healthy and observe that animal alive and walking around and make sure in that aspect that it’s healthy and there’s no signs of disease or any other syndromes or problems. Then they are present, our inspector is present at the time of slaughter for that animal, observes the process, helps assure that the carcass that results from that process is clean and sanitary, handled correctly, goes into the cooler and reaches the satisfactory temperatures so that it maintains its wholesomeness. Then when that establishment, whatever timeframe that is where they break down that carcass into the various cuts and products, they need to do that under inspection as well. All these establishments have food safety plans or systems in place, and our inspectors visit on those inspected days when they’re processing that carcass and make sure that they’re following those plans and following the criteria that they’ve established on how they’re going to produce the product. So, then there’s multiple levels of record keeping, time and temperature aspects that are recorded, things like that. Our inspectors verify that. Then when everything is done correctly and as expected, then the product itself is packaged, and it receives a mark of inspection. That mark of inspection for the state of South Dakota Meat Inspection Program is very visible, very unique. It’s an outline of the state of South Dakota, and it’ll have a number, a three-digit number for inspected establishments. Each locker in the state that operates under inspection has their own unique number. So, I don’t want to single anybody out. I’ll try to pick one that doesn’t exist, but it’ll say 142, and that number would tie to a specific locker within the state and show where that product is produced, and the address and name of that locker is also on the label. So, it’s very clear where it was produced anyway, but that mark of inspection means that it was produced under inspection, and that is the one thing that’s necessary then to sell or donate meat within the state. So, if it does not have that mark of inspection, then it’s typically been processed for the owner of the beef at the time of delivery to the locker, and that’s called custom not for sale. Those products and packages will be labeled not for sale. That meat is intended to go directly back to the owner of the animal. So, kind of a long-winded explanation there, but hopefully that kind of outlines and defines the differences between the two levels of production, and the mark of inspection is the critical thing for this program.

**Madison Kovarna:**

Thank you. I think that the answer, while you might have said that it was long-winded, I think every piece of information that you just shared with us was necessary. I think a lot of people tend to forget when we’re looking at meat products across the state and even in the US that they’re not produced with no guidelines. It’s not a free for all on the football field. There are strict rules that these businesses are expected to meet, and if they don’t meet those, that product is not eligible to be sold to really anywhere. So, I think that’s important for people to remember is that we do have these rules in place, and it is very heavily enforced that these processors follow these rules, not only for the safety of the animals, but also in the end, all in all the safety of the product that we get on our plates at home or in this case, even at school. You kind of hinted at this a little bit, Dr. Miller, but you had talked about the custom exempt, retail exempt, and some different levels of inspection, but can you explain why those different levels exist or that they’re important such as for our people who bring in their own animals to keep it home, maybe only needing that custom exempt inspection versus a true able to kind of cross state line inspections? Could you shed a little bit more light on that?

**Dr. Mendel Miller:**

Sure. As you said, you mentioned one of them that I didn’t mention, and that’s the retail production, and I’ll start with that one. Retail meat sales that consumers pick up at the grocery store and things like that usually do not have a mark of inspection on them. They originate from a carcass that was slaughtered under inspection, but then that carcass is broken down into smaller cuts, whether that’s quarters or whether that’s even into smaller cuts from that. Then that retail store brings that product in, and they do not operate under the same guidelines or system that the inspected locker plants do, but instead they cut that product into final cuts and package it. That product, because it’s not done under inspection, will not have a mark of inspection on it. It will not have the outline of the state of South Dakota. Now, there’s a couple different levels of inspection. There’s our state meat inspection program, which I’ve talked about, and then there’s the Federal Meat Inspection Program, which is overseen by USDA, FSIS, the Food Safety Inspection Service, and they have a different mark of inspection, but it’ll be similar. It’ll be a circle, or it’ll be a triangle, or it’ll be a shape, and it’ll have a different number in the middle of it depending on where that product was inspected at whatever establishment is under federal inspection. So, one of the huge differences between our product, from our program and their product is that federally inspected product can cross state lines to be sold or sold across state lines so that you can have a federally inspected establishment in South Dakota, and they can sell that product to a retail store in North Dakota or a retail store in Nebraska or Kansas or Texas or wherever, and then that retail store would further process that product. Our state meat inspection program is technically and a term that is used, it’s at least equal to the federal program. So, we do things in a similar way and try to accomplish a similar goal and end result, but that product is not eligible to be sold across state lines. So, it can be picked up and bought in South Dakota and transported for personal use across state lines, but it cannot be sold across state lines to be resold by another retail outlet or grocery store or something like that. Now, there is kind of a medium level, which is a cooperative interstate shipment program. Again, as you said before, meat inspection is very complicated, and it can be unreal to try to break down the different levels, but the cooperative interstate shipment meat program is kind of a hybrid between the state and the federal system in that it’s state inspection personnel overseeing the processes, however, it gets a different mark of inspection and then is eligible to be sold across state lines because it’s under federal oversight. So, we have state personnel overseeing the process and state and federal personnel overseeing the state inspectors. So, an added level of oversight, but that does allow locker plants to sell their state inspected product across state lines. We have just a handful or less than a handful, two or three lockers that are currently enrolled in that program, but that it still has the market inspection. So, it would still be eligible for this program as well. I think you mentioned what the differences is between this inspection and why the product that’s going back to the producer as the owner of the animal is a little different. I think, in the end, they’re both safe products, right? Everybody wants safe products and the locker is producing the safe product, but there’s just that extra level of inspector presence there and recordkeeping to make sure that the temperatures are recorded and the processes are followed and the inspector can verify those sorts of things, and that makes it eligible for the mark of inspection. The product that’s labeled not for sale, that goes back to the producer, is certainly safe and clean and wholesome, but it just is not processed or slaughtered with an inspector present to verify that process.

**Anna Tvedt:**

No, Dr. Miller, I think it’s really great what you’re explaining because in conversations with people about Beef to School, one of the most common misconceptions that I hear is that beef must be slaughtered and processed under federal inspection to go to a school, which is one type of inspection that could lead to selling to a school, but what you’re also saying is that it could be slaughtered and processed under state inspection or across state lines at a facility that is participating in that cooperative interstate shipment program, or as a federal facility that might just be across the border in our neighboring states. So, I think that’s really great to know because there are not processing plants in every county, and some schools might have to travel a distance. So, then knowing that they don’t have to travel to a federally inspected plant but can go to their closest state inspected plant or whatever there might be within the area for them does make it more practical and something that I think can be doable in more of our communities when that’s understood.

**Madison Kovarna:**

I agree with you, Anna, in the terms of I think sometimes that the inspection world, and Dr. Miller has hinted at it a few times, you feel like you’re drinking out of that garden hose. There’s a lot of information coming at you, and then those misconceptions can really come up and rear their ugly heads of some schools then may not participate in an excellent program like this because there isn’t a federally inspected plant near them, but there could be one of those smaller state inspected plants nearby that they could get these products from. Dr. Miller brought up an excellent point kind of at the end there, that these products, no matter the level of inspection, are safe and wholesome products. I think that’s a thing to keep at the front of our minds is that all levels of inspection ensure that we are getting a safe product to not only maybe our dinner plates, but to our kids that might be participating in programs like this with those different levels. I think that’s something that sometimes can get lost in the translation when we’re kind of talking about this inspection world. Anna, in regards to Beef to School, we do know that there are several state or several schools within the state that are participating and having either local beef in their lunchroom, but also maybe honoring those other concepts of maybe having education or something like that. I heard that you have recently conducted a survey/report of several schools in regard to this Beef to School. What were some things that you maybe found interesting regarding that report? Maybe were there schools more schools interested than maybe we had previously thought, or what were some big things that you kind of took away from that?

**Anna Tvedt:**

Yes, I’m really excited you asked about that because I think there are some fun findings. So, this was the very first time we surveyed schools across South Dakota, specifically their child nutrition program operators or food service directors, kind of go by different titles, but we had 60% of those schools in South Dakota respond. So, of course, we’re not hearing back from every single district, but what we did find of those districts was that 34% are already using local beef in school lunch programs. Of those all, except I think one school listed that they’d been doing it for 10 or more years, otherwise it was about in the past five years, and 50% of those schools had only been in their first year of using local beef in school meals in the 2023 to 2024 school year. So, really exciting growth that we’re seeing trending upward each year in the number of schools that are jumping on the bandwagon and say, hey, we want to do Beef to School too. So, that’s really awesome. The other thing that was really neat was that 56% of the schools who said they are not doing Beef to School, or they weren’t doing it in the school year then are interested in starting Beef to School, and so there’s still quite a bit of room to grow there. Some other neat things we saw that the main perceived benefit for doing Beef to School by these food service directors was that the quality of the food is better. I hear that talked about in conversations about Beef to School so often, especially with the heart of local animal production is we want to be serving students in communities the same beef that is being grown by community members. So, if you can drive down the highway and see beef on the side of the road or see cattle production going on, then why not have that local beef on the school lunch tray. So, the quality is there, and then what that leads to, right, is that the kids actually want to eat it because it tastes good, and it looks good, and it smells good. So, I heard a food service director, I think it was, I’ll name drop, I think it was Roxann Du Bois in Rapid City with Rapid City Catholic School System mentioned that it’s not nutrition unless they eat it, right? So, if the food has better quality and the students are perceiving that it’s going to taste better, then they’re getting that nutrition because they’re actually more likely to eat it. So, that’s been a really neat finding as well. Then one other thing I’ll mention too was just kind of the practical stuff but we’re really seeing being used in school meals is ground beef most commonly, and then patty is being kind of that next most common. A little bit of roast and cubes as well, and some school districts that are doing some special events that they might have. I think I heard one example doing prime rib for Christmas meal, so kind of one special meal where they went all out with a higher end cut there. So, that report is available online. We partnered with the South Dakota Department of Education on that, and so that’s available on their Farm to School website. We also have some resources about it on the SDSU Extension Farm to School page.

**Madison Kovarna:**

I really like that quote that you just shared, Anna, in regards to it’s not nutrition unless they eat it because I think we’ve all had the horrific experience in the school lunchroom where something gets plopped on your tray, but you’re not entirely sure what it is. I also kind of had a funny thought. We’ve always heard that beef, it’s what’s for dinner, right, but maybe we should be looking at it too of beef it’s for school lunch and kind of bringing that in and bringing the same things that we’re trying to implement in our home life also in these kids continue that experience as they go off to school, wherever that may be, whether it is a large school and maybe some of the smaller ones or even homeschooled for that matter. Anna, you had mentioned where some of that information can be on the Department of Ed’s website, but then also the Extension page. Is there any other resources that schools or maybe parents that are interested in presenting this to their school board can find some more information on Beef to School and Farm to School?

**Anna Tvedt:**

Yes. So, on the SDSU Extension website, if you go under the Food tab and then Local Foods, you’ll find their page about Farm to School. So, that’s got lots of different resources about what Farm to School is and different information about the benefits and some examples of some schools that are implementing it should kind of spark some ideas in what other districts could do. There is on that our recently published frequently asked questions about Beef to School in South Dakota. So, this is the second version of this document. In it, we’ve interviewed some people who have been leading the way with Beef to School across South Dakota, incorporated some of their advice and also incorporated the requirements as Dr. Miller has mentioned. So, it’s really been written for any audience. So, whether if someone is a community member, whether a beef producer, a beef processor or someone involved at the school level, this guide is for you, and we hope that it will answer the questions you have about getting started or maybe growing Beef to School programs. Because I think, circling back to the beginning, Beef to School and Farm to School are a concept that can be done in any matter that works for the community, and so there’s no one size fits all. Myself and others here at SDSU Extension and our partners are here to help if anyone has questions about getting started with Beef to School, but we’re not going to tell you exactly how it must be done because that’s different in each community, and really the best programs are the ones that meet the community needs and what the community has to offer.

**Madison Kovarna:**

I think that’s also one of the most valuable things about this Beef to School and Farm to School is it is so flexible that these schools can really take what impacts them or what maybe they have the resources to do right now. We don’t have to shoot for the moon and do all of the things, but maybe if we can kind of bring in piece by piece over time to implement these things, I think that is something that is super cool. with the flexibility of this program. Dr. Miller, I’ll also ask you the same thing. Is there any resources or locations for information that our listeners can go to maybe learn more about the meat inspection process or those type of things, or any resources that you can think off the top of your head?

**Dr. Mendel Miller:**

Yes. Obviously, there’s lots of things out there, and most of it is really good. I don’t have anything specific as far as the process that I would really want to highlight or point people towards, but one thing I would say is that on our website, the Animal Industry Board website, we do have a list of South Dakota lockers and meat plants. We have a list of the ones that are under inspection and would be able to apply the market inspection for products versus a list of the plants which only do the custom, not for sale producing for the owner of the animals themselves. That’ll give them an idea of who’s next to them or who’s local as far as not having to travel and things like that, and the options that are available for this program, as well as the options for them and their family to use for their own food supply.

**Madison Kovarna:**

Awesome. We’re closing on the end of our time together, which I most definitely am bummed about. This has been a fun conversation, but I will open the floor to either of you with any closing remarks that you want to leave our listeners with before we close out this episode. So, either one of you can go if you have anything to kind of add as a closing statement here.

**Anna Tvedt:**

Madison, I don’t think I have anything to add other than I love your comment of beef. It’s for school lunch. I’m wondering if we could start using that more often. [Laughter]

**Madison Kovarna:**

More often. Every once in a while, I get a good idea. Every once in a while, the squirrel gets the nut and gets to have a win for the day. With that, if there’s no other closing statements, I wanted to thank both of you, Anna and Dr. Miller, for joining me on this episode. I’ve had such a fun time learning more about how our producers can share their high-quality beef with area schools. I hope that our listeners will take advantage of the information you have shared with us and gather information and advocate for programs or initiatives like Beef to School and Farm to School. With that, this has been Cattle HQ. Brought to you by SDSU Extension, headquarters for all things beef cattle. Visit extension.sdstate.edu for the latest beef information. Until next episode, stay curious and keep learning.

**Kiernan Brandt:**

Thank you for tuning into this episode of Cattle HQ. Brought to you by SDSU Extension, headquarters for all things beef. We invite you to visit extension.sdstate.edu for the latest beef information as well as subscribe to the show on Spotify. You will also find show notes and resources from today’s episode, until next time. Remember, success is not a goal, it’s a byproduct.

[Outro music]