

## BLYSTONE FARMS

On the outside, the processing plant at Blystone Farms near Canal Winchester looks like a barn addition on a classic Ohio farmstead. Inside, a woman in a burqa stands behind a computer terminal in an eight-by-eight-foot, windowless cinderblock room, talking to a tall, gray-bearded cleric in a white robe in a language that is difficult to identify. An assistant helps the cleric in the discussion, and occasionally the three lapse into English, as a default language, to clarify a point. Occasionally, a Somali worker passes through, or a slender woman in a cowgirl hat, bandana around her neck and big rubber boots on her feet, exits the kill floor and passes through the office. Meanwhile, a short, sixtyish white couple, stand quietly to the side, waiting their turn.

The cleric is discussing the fee he will pay for the goat he selected earlier in the barnyard and that soon will be brought to him from the back room, butchered and ready to go. The elderly couple wait to discuss the fee they will be paid for the latest trailer load of sheep they have brought down from their Morrow County farm. The woman in the boots and bandana is Katharine Harrison, the general manager of the processing plant, who makes all these disparate pieces come together.



The Blystone family has been raising sheep near Canal Winchester in southeast Franklin County for over 80 years. While Ohio is still the biggest sheep state east of the Mississippi, it is far behind the western states, and the industry here is a shadow of its former self. But Harrison and her father, Joe Blystone, saw the influx of Somalis and other immigrants in Columbus as a new niche for the family business. In December 2004, Blystone Farms opened a processing facility to provide goat and lamb for the tables of these immigrants.

“It was a traditional farm before that,” she said. Her great-grandparents raised sheep in Wyoming, but returned to their native Ohio in the 1920s. The family farm produced sheep, corn, soybeans and wheat. They took their sheep and goats to a stockyard and accepted whatever price they could get. As the Columbus metropolitan area grew, they knew change was necessary – and they saw an opportunity.

“Columbus was changing with an influx of immigrants and refugees,” Harrison said.” That gave us a chance to connect to a different market – and add value to the product while gaining more control over pricing.” She said the Somali population is about 25 percent of the market. Another 25 percent is immigrants from Muslim West Africa, 25 percent Ethiopian and Eritrean Christians. The remaining 25 are from the Middle East, Asia and elsewhere.

Initially, Blystone processed only sheep and goats raised on the farm. But demand grew so fast that they soon needed to buy from other producers – which required additional state and federal certification, for the plant, which is inspected by the Ohio Department of Agriculture. Business is steady, but margins are tight.

There may be new ventures on the horizon. Blystone Farms is mulling the possibility of expanding into poultry processing. Harrison said there are a lot of questions to be answered first – about equipment needs, additional paperwork, hiring additional workers. But it could fill a huge need in a state that has only one commercial poultry plant for custom processing.