



# The Purpose of the Livestock Auction in the 4-H Program

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## Overview

Livestock are a Positive Youth Development tool unique to the 4-H program. Raising animals helps youth members develop important life skills and familiarizes them with many aspects of food production and agriculture. These experiences can be a foundational part of youth growing up to be thriving and contributing members of their community. At the same time, livestock can create a significant economic burden for families - animals, trailers, fitting equipment, and other necessities add up to a significant investment.

Livestock auctions are an opportunity for members to recoup costs associated with the project. Raising a livestock animal is a large financial investment. Costs include the initial purchase of the animal, feed, equipment, and any maintenance needs along the way. Even with the sale of an animal, not all youth participants break even on their project. Local auction rates, health issues, startup costs, and a growing livestock show economy add up to a significant financial risk for 4-H youth and families. Without the financial opportunity livestock auctions create, many families would be unable to participate in livestock programs due to the financial requirements.

In addition to recouping these costs, the sale is also an opportunity for youth to financially plan for their continued participation in livestock projects and the agricultural industry. Many 4-H members use any profit to finance their project for the following year. In some cases, careful

financial planning on the part of families and youth can also give youth a leg up in paying for major life expenses young people encounter, such as continuing education.

## 4-H and Industry Sales – Not the Same!

The 4-H livestock auction is, in many cases, dissimilar from an agricultural market auction. Simply put, this is because the purpose of each is different. The primary purpose of a 4-H sale is to help young people to make their money back on one or two educational projects, and support their future participation in the livestock program. As a result, the economic burden placed on families is reduced and the program is more inclusive of families from various economic backgrounds. This differs greatly from an industry auction, where the goal is to transfer ownership of many animals for the purpose of food production.

## What Livestock should sell?

In many 4-H shows and sales, livestock sell at weights below industry slaughter norms (See table 1). This is often a topic of conversation between 4-H staff, fair boards, auction associations, etc. In Arizona, 4-H minimum weights (defined locally by county fairs and partner organizations) average 70-80 percent of industry slaughter weights. Further, 4-H staff across Arizona report that youth livestock

Table 1: Comparison of 2024 average USDA reported slaughter weights to county 4-H and Arizona State Fair weights.

| Comparison of 4-H County, State Fair, and USDA Sale/Slaughter Weights (Pounds) |         |      |         |       |
|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------|------|---------|-------|
| Livestock Type                                                                 | Swine   | Beef | Lamb    | Goat  |
| Arizona County Lowest Minimum Weight                                           | 195     | 900  | 85      | 50    |
| Arizona County Highest Minimum Weight                                          | 225     | 1000 | 110     | 70    |
| Average County Minimum Weight                                                  | 217     | 950  | 97      | 62    |
| State Fair Minimum Weight                                                      | 230     | 1000 | 100     | 61    |
| USDA Average Slaughter Weights                                                 | 270-285 | 1350 | 120-140 | 65-90 |

projects entered into fair tend to be close to the minimum weight required to show and sell.

So why is there such a significant discrepancy between the agricultural industry and 4-H sanctioned auctions? In the eyes of 4-H, there are many important distinctions between the livestock industry and a 4-H project. A few key points are discussed below:

**Access and Opportunity:** 4-H needs to be inclusive to youth and families from across the spectrum of opportunity. Our goal is to support all youth and families to make educational opportunities accessible to all communities we serve (USDA/NIFA Strategic Plan). Growing a 4-H project is expensive - the feed, veterinary care, and transportation costs rack up quickly. One way of reducing the cost to participants is to allow for lighter weight (i.e. not market ideal) livestock to be entered in educational events supported by 4-H, such as the county fair. As a result, youth generally own the livestock for less time, reducing costs. In addition, most youth will be able to achieve minimum weight requirements and recoup the cost of their project. Ideally, these young people will be able to make a profit so they can invest in next year's 4-H project or their future. Long term, if youth manage their 4-H projects effectively, they can create an economic boost for their family and community. Also, skills practiced in 4-H projects are foundational throughout life – financial management, nutrition, agricultural literacy, etc. – knowledge that helps young people becoming civically engaged, happy, healthy, and productive citizens.

**Educational Merit is Not Necessarily Market Perfection:** Livestock does not need to be perfect market quality for a youth to gain significant educational merit from the experience. Working with livestock, and ensuring an animal is treated ethically and responsibly, is a foundational learning experience for youth. In addition, the connections

youth make with caring adult mentors have been shown in research to have significant positive impacts to their long-term health and economic outcomes (Lerner & Lerner, 2013; Redford et al., 2016). Benefits from participating in 4-H transcend the final weight of any single animal. Youth gain skills in relating to others, working, critical thinking, healthy living, and many other life skill areas that have long term effects on their quality of life (Arnold, 2018; Hendricks, 1996).

**Show Livestock and Market Standards Differ:** It is important to remember that the style and cost of the show are not necessarily parallel to market or industry norms. The demands and values of the show ring and commercial industries are constantly changing, and often differ from show to show and judge to judge. Swine grown on an industrial lot, for example, will not generally look the same as a pig selectively bred to be competitive in the show ring. The show economy has capitalized greatly on this - selling lines of seedstock far above production market prices. Other show practices not reflected in market norms include training, hair and skin conditioning, clipping, and other grooming. While 4-H youth and agriculturalists both strive to produce a high-quality product for consumers, the 4-H program utilizes livestock as a tool to support young people in becoming thriving adults.

**Market and Show Costs Differ:** The practices and costs associated with raising show animals differ greatly from the agricultural industry. Commercial prices and standards are typically much more economical, while show stock, equipment, and other necessities of performing well in the livestock ring often add up to a significant investment. County and/or state "Bred and Fed" classes are a great strategy for fairs and other shows to create affordable pathways for youth to show and compete, while sustaining the importance of local genetics. These classes provide an

avenue for local producers to market their stock, and also encourage youth to expand their involvement and passion to include breeding and genetic selection of their own stock. These classes along with livestock carcass classes are avenues where industry standards are encouraged in the junior show ring.

**Buyer Motivations:** In simple terms, if 4-H buyers were purchasing market livestock, they would not pay over market price. So why do buyers pay more than market value for 4-H livestock? Of course they want to support that 4-H youth, families, and their community. These are admirable sentiments prized in 4-H. Buyers look to support youth - this impacts the ability of youth to continue participating in 4-H and access all the benefits of Positive Youth Development.

## Wrap Up

The purpose of 4-H transcends simply growing market animals for sale. Social competence and other life skills taught in 4-H Positive Youth Development increase the likelihood for young people to be happy, healthy, and successful adults. Buckles and ribbons are great achievements - tangible markers of achievement and learning - but they eventually collect dust. Caring adult mentors, life lessons, and social/career skills learned will create a supportive framework for 4-H members lasting a lifetime. This sense of community and peer-to-peer connectedness is foundational for these long-term positive outcomes to come to fruition. The livestock show and sale is a great venue for youth to earn success, gain community connections, and see that their community is supporting them towards a better future.

The 4-H experience needs to be accessible to all. Centering the focus of 4-H sanctioned shows on show livestock perfection is both an inaccurate representation of the livestock industry, and a misunderstanding of the purpose of 4-H. There is a happy medium to be found between ideal market livestock, and a supportive community looking to invest in the next generation.

## AZ 4-H Resources

- [The Purpose of Livestock in the 4-H Program](#)
- [4-H Project Essentials Livestock Fact Sheet Large Stock Vol. 1](#)
- [4-H Livestock Judging: Program Overview](#)
- [Livestock Feeding Glossary](#)
- [Growing a Swine Project to Market Weight](#)
- [Growing a Beef Project](#)

## Works Cited and Further Reading

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