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Times are tough for small livestock and poultry producers. The consolidation of the meat industry has resulted in the closing of hundreds of slaughter and packing plants, and some of the ones still in operation often don't cater to small, specialty or niche producers. Many of these packers require high minimum head counts for slaughter, and they're often too far away to make trucking of relatively small shipments of animals to them economically feasible. In addition, high feed and other costs aren't matched by the prices producers get for their live animals.

At the same time, interest in buying from specialty meat producers is growing among consumers,

restaurateurs and retailers. Grass-fed or organically raised beef and free-range poultry are seen by some consumers as both more flavorful and healthier than conventionally raised equivalents. The local food movement encourages consumers to buy their foods from nearby producers wherever possible. The U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) is supporting this movement with its Know Your Farmer, Know Your Food initiative, which promotes farmers' markets and other outlets for locally grown foods.

The issue, then, for many small producers, is not finding the market so

much as it is converting their live animals into a product that can take advantage of it.

A promising answer to this question is the mobile slaughterhouse — a slaughter facility mounted on a trailer that comes to the farmer. Its advantages are many, including low capital costs, convenience, low processing costs and the marketing advantage of being able to say that your animals are slaughtered on your own property. Mobile slaughter units also don't attract the same kind of concern that brick-and-mortar facilities arouse among neighbors — the “not-in-my-backyard” problem.

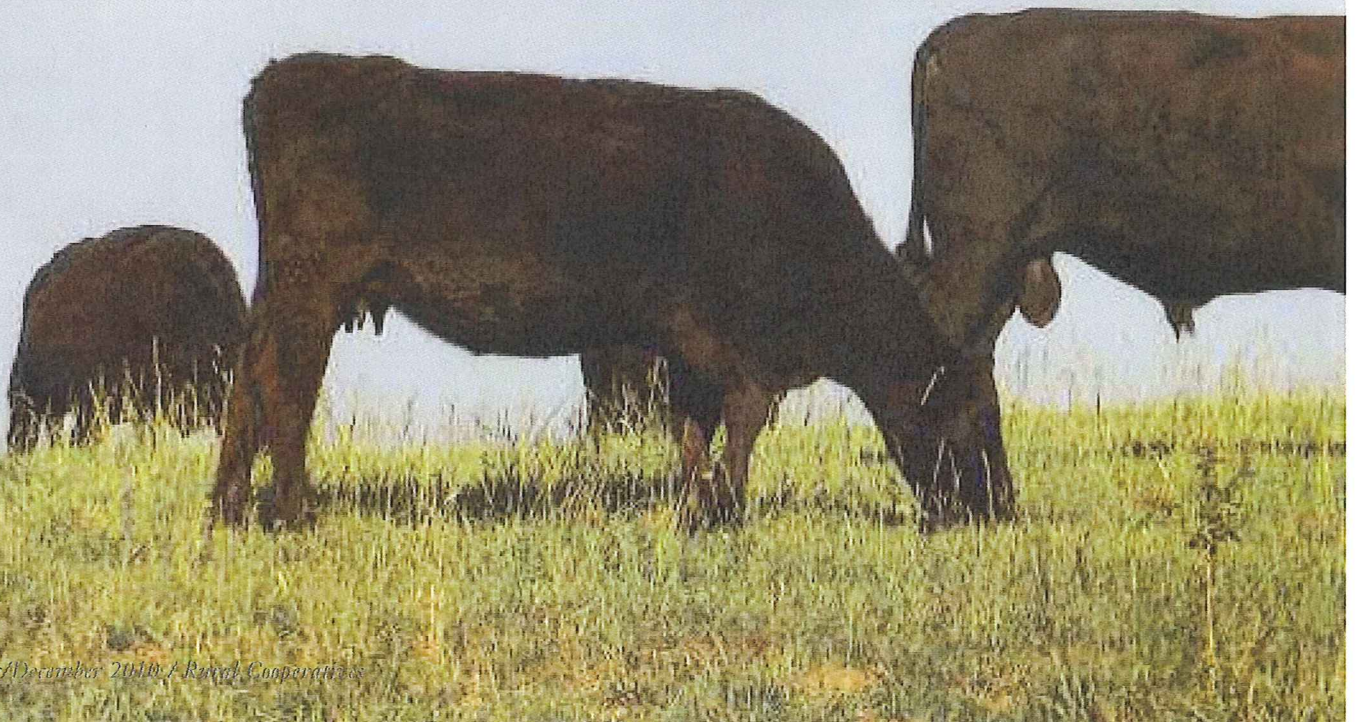


Opportunity for co-ops

As a result, mobile slaughter units have become a growing movement across the United States. A number of small service cooperatives have been set up to take advantage of the new technology.

Going Mobile

Co-ops operate traveling slaughter units to help grow local foods movement



“We get about a 50-percent net gain over marketing live cattle.”

The seed of the movement was planted in the late 1990s at Broken Arrow Ranch in Texas, a hunting establishment where customers pay to hunt exotic animals, such as African antelope. The ranch developed a slaughtering trailer to process the carcasses.

Not long afterwards, a group of livestock producers in northwest Washington was looking for a way to start producing meat for local markets. They found the answer in Broken Arrow's trailer.

The group went to a local nonprofit organization, the Lopez Community Land Trust, which focuses on sustainable rural development, for help. The Lopez Trust in turn hired Bruce Dunlop, a sheep farmer and former chemical engineer, to develop a slaughter trailer. Island Grown Farmers Cooperative was formed to administer the slaughter, cutting and packing services. The initial membership fee was \$600.

The initiative was made possible by new U.S. Food and Drug Administration regulations under the rubric of Hazard Analysis & Critical Control Points (HACCP). Instead of establishing rigid requirements, as with previous approaches to regulation,

HACCP seeks to work with food processors to develop appropriate plans for facilities that meet sanitary rules and other requirements. The new protocol is a more flexible regulatory approach that allows for innovation and unique circumstances.

When finished in 2002, the mobile slaughter unit was installed in a 32-foot goose-neck trailer, at a cost of \$150,000. Financing was provided by private donations and grants from various agencies, including a \$50,000 Rural Business Opportunity Grant provided by USDA Rural Development. The unit is owned by the Trust, which leases it to the cooperative. Dunlop estimates that the trailer alone would today cost \$195,000, plus another \$15,000 to \$20,000 for small equipment.

Facility meets all regulations

The mobile facility is fully compliant with federal regulations, and all of its products are USDA inspected. A small office space is provided for the inspector. The facility can slaughter up to 10 head of cattle per day, at a cost to the farmer of \$105 per animal. Up to 40 sheep or 24 pigs can be handled daily, at prices of \$37 and \$53 each, respectively.

Labor accounts for 70 percent of operating costs. Because the unit was financed with grants and donations, there is no loan or investment to be repaid; the fees need only cover overhead, labor and similar costs.

However, Dunlop says that such a unit could easily repay its purchase costs in a few years.


Cutting and wrapping services are provided by the co-op in a brick-and-mortar facility which can also produce sausages. However, marketing is handled individually by member-producers. The cooperative has six employees, including two butchers who handle slaughtering, and three meat cutters. Dunlop has stayed on as a member of the board of directors.

The slaughtering is done on the producer's property, usually in an open field. The trailer carries a supply of potable water for the slaughter process and for cleanup. If it's done often in one location, the producer may also have to provide a concrete drainage pad with a sump for runoff.

If done only occasionally on a farm or ranch, the operation can be carried out directly on the grass. The animal is killed on the ground and allowed to bleed out. It's then winched into the trailer, cleaned, dressed and hung in a refrigerated compartment in the trailer. At the end of the day, the carcasses can be transported to the cooperative's packing facility or the farmers can make their own arrangements.

Offal and hides are taken away with the truck; any other waste is composted. Dunlop says composting works well.

“It kills the pathogens, it's inexpensive and there's little odor,” he



Black Angus cattle are one of the more popular beef breeds in the United States. Inset photo: Mobile processing units such as this, which travel to farms and ranches, were inspired by a rig developed in Texas in the 1990s to process wild game.

notes. Except where production volume requires a sump, the blood and water go directly on the ground. Overall, he says, operations have little environmental impact, especially since the location of the trailer can be changed with each visit.

While making the mobile slaughterhouse possible, the HACCP approval process presented its own hurdles, Dunlop says. "It was a shift from approving everything ahead of time to evaluating things as it went along."

The process requires a written plan, which is then evaluated for problems and modified. In the case of the new slaughter unit, equipment and procedures had to be tried out by slaughtering a few animals at a time, making changes until both the co-op and the inspectors were comfortable with the process.

Dunlop says that things were complicated by the fact that inspectors were just learning the new procedures when the co-op sought approval. But, he says that they were open to new ideas and willing to work with the cooperative to reach a satisfactory conclusion. "Someone doing it now can build on our experience," he says. "They wouldn't have to go through all that."

Puget Sound co-op boosts local sales

Not far away, another group of Washington livestock producers took advantage of Island Grown's pioneering work to establish their own processing cooperative. Puget Sound Meat Producers Cooperative has been operating for just over a year, with a roll of 60 voting members in nine contiguous counties, and another 30 associate members.

Perry Schermerhorn, president of the co-op, says the idea for the cooperative occurred to Cheryl Ouellete, a local hog farmer looking for ways to add value to her product. Selling butchered meat instead of live hogs seemed the natural solution. But the local slaughterhouse had closed,

meaning that the nearest processing facility was hundreds of miles away in Oregon.

With the big population centers of Seattle and Tacoma nearby, a market for locally grown meats was assured — if the meat carried USDA inspection stamps. Island Grown's approach seemed like the answer.

The first exploratory meeting, in February 2008, drew 80 local producers, and with the help of the Washington State Small Business Assistance Center at Green River Community College, a business plan was put together and the idea pitched to the Pierce Conservation District board of directors, which approved \$200,000 in funds to build the trailer in June 2008.

The cooperative itself was set up that November, and in June 2009 the mobile processing unit was delivered. Puget Sound's unit is based on the Island

Grown design, but larger. Built on a 45-foot semi-trailer, it has bigger storage facilities and the ability to process more animals at a time.

The Puget Sound co-op works a little differently than the Island Grown co-op. Instead of making appointments to slaughter at each customer's farm, the slaughter unit operates at three venues on a weekly, or semi-weekly, schedule. Producers transport their animals to the most convenient location. Members can purchase a special class of stock to have priority in scheduling. Two of the locations are on members' property; the third is provided at no cost by a local landowner.

The cooperative doesn't offer cutting and wrapping services. Those are provided by private packing facilities in nearby Rochester and Bremerton.

Schermerhorn says the cooperative has the capacity for about 140 new

Assistance for new mobile slaughter efforts

Interest in mobile slaughter units is growing across the country. At least nine poultry units and a similar number of red meat slaughter trailers are now operating in various states. Seminars on the subject attract crowds. A recent session held jointly by the Colorado and Wyoming state agriculture departments drew 150 people from states as far away as New York, Ohio and California.

There are hurdles to overcome in starting a mobile unit, including regulatory and permitting issues and financing. But much of the pioneering work has already been done. Producers interested in starting such an operation can call upon a range of information and assistance resources.

The Niche Meat Processor Assistance Network website, www.nichemeatprocessing.org, offers a wealth of information on regulations, design and construction, management, financing and other issues. The site offers links to a number of "webinars," including one led by Island Grown's Bruce Dunlop, on the various issues. It also offers a spreadsheet feasibility calculator put together by Kathleen Painter, an analyst at the University of Idaho.

The Food Safety and Inspection Service offers a "Mobile Slaughter Compliance Guide" on its website for both red meat and poultry operations, and has declared its interest in promoting small processors.

USDA Rural Development offers a number of financial programs that may be helpful, and has extensive educational materials to help producers learn about starting a cooperative. It can also offer technical assistance. To learn more, visit: www.rurdev.usda.gov, or call your USDA Rural Development office and ask to talk to a business and co-op programs specialist: 1-800-670-6553.

members; the slaughter unit currently operates at about 25 percent of capacity. Members each market their own products. Some retail their products directly at farmers' markets and similar venues. This sales strategy, Schermerhorn says, offers the highest margins: 50 to 100 percent.

Other producers have contracts to provide high-quality meats to restaurants, local food stores and even to food co-ops. They typically garner markups of 10 to 30 percent. Overall, Schermerhorn says, "We get about a 50-percent net gain over marketing live cattle."

Montana co-op focuses on poultry

Growers of four-legged livestock aren't the only producers who can use mobile slaughter units. The Montana Poultry Growers Cooperative built on the experience of Island Grown, with appropriate modifications. With the help of Farms for Families, a nonprofit that promotes locally grown foods, and other organizations, including USDA Rural Development's Cooperative Services, the co-op developed a mobile slaughter unit for poultry.

Jan Tusick, the president of the cooperative, recalls that the project had its own snags and problems — most involving licensing.

Processing poultry is simpler than slaughtering sheep and cattle, and can be done fairly easily by the grower with the proper equipment, obviating the need for employees to do the slaughtering. Also, USDA inspection isn't necessary under two USDA Food Safety and Inspection Service (FSIS) exemptions: one for producers who process 1,000 birds or less each year, and another for those who process up to 20,000 birds annually — provided that certain requirements are met, including proper sanitary practices.

The cooperative chose to operate under the 1,000-bird exemption, which is slightly less rigorous. Under that rule, producers must own and raise their birds and must process them on their own property. They must sell directly



Instead of making on-farm visits, some mobile processing rigs make weekly or semi-weekly rounds of centrally located sites, where producers meet them with their livestock. USDA photo

to customers; they are not allowed to sell to resellers, such as grocery stores.

The effort faced a snag, however, because Montana state law didn't recognize mobile slaughterhouses. Grow Montana, a pro-local-food lobbying group, successfully petitioned the Montana state legislature to pass a law in 2005 allowing inspection by the state. After the state Department of Livestock promulgated regulations in accordance with the new law, the effort was ready to go ahead.

It took several years to develop the mobile facility, but finally, in June 2010, it was approved and ready to go. It consists of a small truck and trailer, with the trailer containing the slaughter facilities and the truck having chilling and storage capabilities. The unit travels around the state to producer-members, who call the cooperative to reserve its use.

The cooperative also offers training in slaughtering in accordance with government requirements. Meanwhile, the cooperative is pursuing ways of developing the market for locally raised poultry, including customer education and developing heritage breeds.

North Carolina co-op promotes sustainable farming

Meanwhile, across the country in North Carolina, different problems have resulted in another approach to slaughtering poultry. NC Choices is a nonprofit initiative of the Center for Environmental Farming Systems, itself a program of several North Carolina universities and the state's department of agriculture. Its purpose is to promote "sustainable" local meat production, and it provides networking and technical assistance to develop markets

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