

WORKING THE LAND: THE STORY OF CONNECTICUT AGRICULTURE

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Is a Mobile Slaughterhouse Coming to Connecticut?

Cutting-edge process could benefit state farmers and consumers

By Ken Simon

Mention the word “slaughterhouse” and most people will conjure images of huge midwestern meat factories, exploited immigrant workers, dangerous conditions – you know, the whole blood-and-guts Upton-Sinclair scene.

But to the approximately 200 small-scale state livestock farmers and ag-sector managers who packed a meeting last Thursday at the Litchfield Inn, “slaughterhouse” – specifically a proposed federally inspected mobile slaughterhouse – evoked something much more positive: an innovative way to support state farm viability, protect Connecticut’s endangered farmland, and supply a largely unmet consumer demand for humanely harvested, locally raised, organic or natural beef, pork and lamb.

“We’re not trying to duplicate Chicago in 1904,” said Bruce Dunlop, a Seattle-area beef and sheep farmer who was the main speaker for the evening. Dunlop was a founding member of the country’s first USDA-approved slaughterhouse on wheels, serving the Lopez Island, Washington area, near Seattle..

The meeting was organized by Eliot Wadsworth, the proprietor of Litchfield’s White Flower Farm, a greenhouse and catalog operation. Wadsworth is using 80 acres of his 250-acre farm for raising beef cattle, which he intends to sell to his catalog customers and at the farm’s retail store. It was his frustration with the lack of a nearby USDA-approved slaughterhouse that led him to investigate the emerging mobile slaughterhouse technology.

Surveying the overflow crowd, it was easy to see that many farmers in the state are also looking for a solution to the processing bottleneck. “Those who think that state agriculture is dead are clearly dead-wrong,” Wadsworth said in his welcoming remarks.

The audience listened closely as Dunlop narrated a step-by-step slideshow that detailed the history and success of his Seattle-area cooperative meat processing operation.

Their success runs smack-dab counter to long-established trends in livestock processing and serves as an inspiring example for the state’s livestock farmers and advocates for a more sustainable local-food system.

As in most other types of agriculture, the raising and processing of livestock has been subject to years of consolidation. This decades-long move to ever-bigger farms supplying mega-slaughterhouses and cutting operations has led to a precipitous decline in both the number of small- and medium-scale livestock producers and the local infrastructure on which they depend.

Today the top four food corporations supply us with 80 percent of the meat we eat in the country. Each of these conglomerates process as many as 5,000 head a day on huge killing, cutting and packaging floors.

Meanwhile, consumers are increasingly demanding local, naturally raised or organic foods, all among the fastest growing segments of the food industry. But when it comes to meat, it is typically impossible to find USDA-inspected meats that come from Connecticut-grown livestock.

“There’s been a huge increase of interest among consumers in the last 5 to 10 years in knowing who raised the animals they’re eating,” Dunlop said. “Now that the markets are back in a way, due to consolidation the processing infrastructure isn’t there.” There are just 350 USDA slaughterhouses in the country, down from about 550 since 2001.

The resulting challenge for local producers of cattle, pigs, lamb and goat is formidable and frustrating -- all this consumer demand no way to efficiently meet it without a nearby federally inspected meat plant.

Connecticut's last large federally regulated slaughterhouse was in Stafford Springs. For the last couple of years, it has been operated by a Muslim family who processed only *halal* meats (religiously approved slaughter). The family recently closed the facility, becoming the latest in a string of failed operators. A USDA-inspected slaughterhouse in Bristol processes mostly limited numbers of sheep, goats and lamb.

State producers who want to sell their meat can do so on their farm, but without USDA inspection and the familiar Cryovac wrap. That is not a great way to maximize retail distribution channels.

In order to get federally approved processing, state farmers have to transport their animals to slaughterhouses in New York State and in Massachusetts. It is far from an ideal situation: Wait lists are booked months in advance, travel costs are hefty, and the animals have to endure a crowded, stressful trip, which many farmers feel releases hormones that adversely affect the quality and taste of the meat.

The need for an alternative became clearer in December when a Athol, Mass, slaughterhouse used by Connecticut producers burned to the ground.

According to Dunlop, the advantages of a mobile slaughterhouse over a permanent structure include lower processing costs, reduced stress on animals, lower capital investment; and – this is a big one – less resistance from municipalities and neighbors.

“Try to build one on your property,” he said, “and see what your neighbors think.”

Dunlop pointed out that the Lopez Island facility cost about \$200,000 (versus about \$400,000 for a stationary facility) and can theoretically process up to 30 head of cattle a day, although it typically handles more like six to 12 head on each farm it visits.

The biggest problem in establishing a rolling abattoir in Connecticut will be state and federal regulatory hurdles. Dunlop spearheaded the six-year effort in Washington State to educate federal and state regulators on the benefits of a mobile operation and meeting the project's financial challenges.

That facility opened in 2002 after ultimately gaining political and financial support from local producers, area land trusts, Cooperative Extension, the federal and state agriculture departments, area retailers, restaurants and consumers.

According to Dunlop, the USDA now looks at the project as an unqualified success. This is a very good sign for Connecticut and other states looking at this technology. Since the Seattle-area facility started, other USDA-approved mobile slaughterhouses based on the Washington model have been established in Texas, Hawaii, and New Mexico.

Last year, its third in operation, Dunlop's co-op processed about 500 head of beef and 500 lamb and hogs, comprising about 250,000 pounds of meat. With consumer demand continuing to grow and distribution channels expanding, the co-op is planning to raise output by another 50 percent within the next couple of years.

The venture has been a great success for area farmers. The 55 co-op members (up from 25 in its first year) are taking in \$850,000 in annual retail sales, more than double their first-year revenues of \$421,000. Nearly all of these sales would not have existed without the facility, according to Dunlop.

The cooperative, which services member producers within a 100 mile radius of the cutting plant, takes in \$250,000 in fees from members, which supports \$225,000 in annual payroll costs for six yearround employees, another nice boost to the local economy.

The unit, built in an unmarked tractor trailer, visits about one farm each workday and is operated by one or two butchers, with the farmer helping to handle the live animals and disposing of the waste material -- hides, blood, soft tissue, and bones – known as offal.

One important benefit of a mobile facility is that the offal can be composted right on the farm rather than having to be rendered at a traditional stationary plant. The result is a great natural fertilizer, according to Dunlop, who extols the USDA-inspected process as “good nutrient management.”

After the farmer shepherds his unsuspecting animal to the killing zone, the butcher uses a stun rod that causes unconsciousness, then cuts a main artery, causing a quick death. He hooks the

animal to a winch in the trailer for bleeding, skinning and gutting, after which he splits the carcass into halves or quarters prior to hanging it in the trailer cooler.

An onsite USDA inspector checks each live animal prior to its harvest and then again as the animal is being processed in the trailer.

The 33-foot-long trailer, lined in stainless steel, is completely self-contained with heat, cooling and potable water. It can hold about 10 beef cattle, 20 hogs or 70 sheep.

After processing in the trailer, the meat is taken to the co-op's USDA-regulated cutting plant, where it is cut into retail portions, packaged and cold-stored until the farmer picks up his ready-for-retail packaged meat for delivery to customers.

If mobile-slaughterhouse technology takes off in Connecticut, the cooperative formed to own it might have a leg up on the Seattle operators, who also had to establish their own USDA packaging facility. It turns out that Connecticut has a brand-new state-of-the-art meat processing plant in Winsted that will specialize in natural and certified-organic products.

Litchfield Farms Natural & Organic Company owner Andy Angera told the audience that his plant would be able to take all the meat that a mobile slaughterhouse could process. With 75 years of family experience in the meat processing business in New Jersey, Angera said that his plant, now under construction, will offer USDA-approved state-of-the-art processing facilities and custom labeling for local producers of certified organic or naturally raised pork, veal and beef. He expects to be open for business in early summer.

After the evening's presentation, attendees filled out a form to indicate their interest and supply some data about their existing farming operations. The next step will be to collate and analyze survey results, followed by the establishment of a group of volunteers ready to take the next steps in what will likely prove a complicated process.

GOALS FOR A MOBILE SLAUGHTERHOUSE

The goals of the Lopez Island producer cooperative are also a fine agenda for the Connecticut proposal.

- 1) Become less dependent on imported food
- 2) Support a stronger local food system with a quality, safe and healthy product
- 3) Help small and limited-resource producers to gain revenues and profits.
- 4) Make local food production a vital part of the food economy.
- 5) Create a direct link between consumers and farmers.
- 6) Increase opportunities for organic and naturally raised beef.