

# **WA Farmers Look To Mobile Slaughterhouse**

Maurren O'Hagan

SEATTLE (AP) — Walk into your neighborhood grocery and you'll likely find local apples, local cherries or local potatoes. What you're not likely to find is local beef — or, for that matter, local lamb or local pork.

The "locavore" movement may be sweeping the nation, but there is a big gap when it comes to meat. Consumers want it, but farmers can't get it to them.

A coalition of Puget Sound-area farmers is hoping an answer lies in a specially built, 45-foot, stainless-steel trailer. Officially called a mobile meat processing unit, it's basically a slaughterhouse on wheels.

Though the project may sound grisly, it's seen by farmers as humane, by government as beneficial and by chefs and grocers as an opportunity to meet future consumer demand.

Seth Caswell, president of the Seattle Chef's Collaborative, says he and other chefs are looking forward to "getting a product I understand better and know how it was raised, what it was fed, how it was butchered, how it was processed. I'm concerned with that, as somebody who cooks at home, and also somebody who cooks in a restaurant."

The idea grew out of a 2007 Agriculture Summit in Enumclaw where local farmers identified a key obstacle to bringing livestock to market: There aren't nearby places where small farmers can get their livestock killed and butchered.

The problem is connected with industry consolidation. The market is dominated by big companies, whose feed lots fatten cattle by the thousands. Slaughter is done on a mass scale, in large facilities.

Meanwhile, small U.S. Department of Agriculture-inspected meat-processing plants have been shutting down.

The little guys have been squeezed out, said Cheryl Ouellette, who has a farm in Pierce County and goes by "Cheryl the Pig Lady." She's the leading booster of the mobile unit.

"If we can fix this problem for farmers, they can stay on the land," she said. That's something government supports.

And in the age of the locavore — a movement that advocates the consumption of locally grown food for health and environmental reasons — it's something consumers seem to want, as well.

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If you're a small-livestock farmer in Washington state, you have three choices to get your meat to market:

—Sell your animal at auction, and it will be shipped to a feedlot. Your cattle or pigs then are lumped in with all the other animals there, and the meat is sold in quantity.

—Sell your animal live to consumers, then have it slaughtered at a facility that isn't inspected by the USDA. (The state Department of Agriculture inspects such facilities instead.) Without the USDA inspection, you're prohibited from selling individual steaks and such. Instead, consumers have to buy one-quarter of a carcass or more. That market is limited, and you can't charge as much. That means foregone profits.

—Have the animal killed at a USDA-inspected facility. This last option is the only way to go if you want to sell to grocers, restaurants or at farmers markets, or even sell a steak to your neighbor. The problem: The few of these facilities in the region operate on a large scale, or under contracts with a limited number of producers. If you're a small farmer, good luck getting squeezed in, Ouellette said.

As a result, farmers have to load their animals into trailers and ship them to a slaughterhouse hundreds of miles away. Ouellette, for example, ships pigs from her farm south of Tacoma to Sandy, Ore. Cattle have gone to Sunnyside, Yakima County. The carcasses then must be hauled to another facility for butchering and packaging.

That's a long trip — and a lot of extra expense — for meat that's supposed to be locally produced. And it's stressful on the animals, Ouellette said.

Ouellette and other small producers were aware of a mobile slaughterhouse operating in the San Juan Islands, and figured that model could be replicated.

The Pierce County Conservation District put up \$300,000, which covered the cost of building the new mobile processing unit. The district believes it will help preserve local farmland, not only in Pierce County but also in the five other counties where it will operate.

The unit, complete with a USDA inspector and organic certification, will go farm to farm, so animals won't have to be shipped. It will drive the carcasses to a cut-and-wrap facility in Thurston County.

Farmers then can sell to whomever they want, hopefully turning a profit.

"It's about saving the entire industry," Ouellette said.

That likely will take more than a trailer, but it's a start, others say. Getting the unit running at full capacity will take a year or more. Even then, there are hurdles to getting local meat into consumers' hands.

PCC Natural Markets loves the idea — "Anything we can do to support the small-

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scale farmer," spokeswoman Trudy Bialic said — but the company won't commit yet to stocking the meat.

"We're still going to have to deal with it vendor by vendor," she said. "Just because it's local doesn't mean it meets our standards."

Besides, dealing with a lot of small farmers can be more complicated than dealing with one or two larger producers.

But Caswell, who in the fall hopes to open his downtown Seattle restaurant, named emmer & rye, thinks consumers can't get enough of locally grown products.

"Restaurants are using that as a selling point," he said. "'This is from such-and-such farm; we met the farmer.' It's a conversation piece. It's something we can talk about. We can have a story behind it."

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