

Local Meat Processing: More Humane, Less Expensive Options

Mobile units and other small-scale meat processing facilities can help meet the need of farmers who want to sell their meat locally.

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Farmers often have trouble finding local meat processors: Local meat units can help fill the gap.

Photo By U.S. Department of Agriculture

Demand for local, humanely raised, grass-fed meat is growing, but at the same time, local meat processing facilities have been going out of business. As a result, small-scale livestock producers often have to travel farther to find a meat processor, which means greater fuel costs and time investment for the farmer, and more travel stress for the animals. Another issue is the relatively high cost of meat processing: The more money farmers have to spend to slaughter their animals, the more they have to charge for their meat.

A growing number of farmers are addressing these issues by taking slaughter into their own hands. One example is the Jeffries family of [Sugar Mountain Farm](#) in Vermont, who decided to build their own hog slaughter facility after their former processor retired a few years ago. Because they're building it themselves, and because the completed facility will be small (so small that it's sometimes called [nano-butcher](#)ing), the Jeffries expect the total cost of the project to be much less than building a traditional meat processing facility — plus, it's a great way to expand their business and reduce their processing costs.

Another farmer who took slaughtering into his own hands is Daniel Dover of [Darby Farms](#) in Good Hope, GA. Five years into the pastured poultry business, he will sell somewhere in the neighborhood of 8,000-9,000 birds. That's impressive by any standard. Dover must transport those birds to the [Foothills Pilot Plant](#) in North Carolina for processing. Every two weeks he drives four hours with a load of 350 live birds. He stays overnight and drives back with 350 chilled carcasses. That's 400 more miles on his truck and two days away from the farm — inefficient by any standard. The enterprising Dover makes the best of the situation by purchasing local biodiesel for his truck and hiring on at the slaughter plant while his birds are processed.

"I'm a regular employee on the processing line, being paid by the hour," he says with a grin.

Well, not exactly a regular employee, because the others are North Carolina prisoners on work release. Foothills Pilot Plant is a clever partnership of two North Carolina universities, independent livestock producers, rural development agencies, and county government. The diverse partners cobbled together money from nearly a dozen sources to finance the plant. An estimated 35,000 chickens and rabbits are expected to pass through the doors this first year, but the operation will not show a profit until there is a sustained annual pass through of 50,000 animals. A creative approach to affordable labor is just one of the ways the plant cuts expenses while growing that customer base.





Their goal is conservative. Even as the direct-to-consumer market continues to expand, major chains are seeking their share of locally grown meats. Chefs ranked locally sourced meats as the [number one food trend for 2012](#), according to a survey by the National Restaurant Association. As for retailers, Whole Foods Market plans to purchase 22,000 pasture-raised birds for their southeastern stores alone this year. Those birds will come from [White Oak Pastures](#) in southwest Georgia, diagonally across the state from Darby Farms. Besides selling to Whole Foods, White Oak Pastures provides chicken, beef and lamb products to Publix Supermarkets, independent stores and directly to consumers from their online catalog.

On-farm slaughter is the only way to humanely and efficiently process that many animals, and fifth-generation White Oak Pastures is the only farm in the United States to have both poultry and red-meat processing plants on site that can use the USDA-inspected seal. According to owner Will Harris III, that status is taking the farm full circle back to its beginning.

Starting in 1866, the Harris family slaughtered their farm's beef, pork and poultry for sale to individuals and businesses around Bluffton, GA. After World War II, vertical integration became the norm, and small-scale producers had to find a rung on the ladder. White Oak Pastures raised stocker calves within that system, but the enterprise lacked the satisfaction of raising an animal from start to finish and then delivering a wholesome meat product into a customer's hands.

In the 1990s, when Will Harris III first heard that traditionally raised food might make a comeback, he became a pioneer in multi-species grazing and organic production. His venture grew steadily along with the new industry. By the next decade White Oak Pastures was poised to pioneer again — first with the red meat slaughter facility and then with the poultry plant. When his daughter Jenni joined the family business, she became the fifth generation of HARRISES to raise livestock on the farm.

Making news on another front, both of the White Oak Pastures slaughter plants use solar thermal panels to heat water and a 50,000-watt solar voltaic array for operating power. The red-meat plant was designed by livestock activist [Dr. Temple Grandin](#), and both facilities stay true to White Oak Pastures' mission of humane livestock treatment from birth through slaughter.

Whether a producer aims to model after Darby Farms or White Oak Pastures, everyone starts by asking the same question — Just how do animals move from grazing pastures to gracing a table?

First things first, for home consumption or sale? Animals raised for family consumption can be processed at home. Some growers process communally, spreading the cost of shared equipment among the families. However, if the meat will be sold, things get a lot more complicated. Until recently only the most determined producers tackled the maze of overlapping authorities and conflicting regulations, but agency communication has improved with the increased demand for local meats.

Editor's note — See the "Mysteries of Meat Inspection" sidebar later in this article for an introduction to inspection categories followed by links to some of the new resources for producers.

Once an individual or cooperative decides to add value by processing their own animals, the next decision is whether to use a commercial slaughter service or operate their own facility.

Rent to Kill — Two Options for Hiring a Professional Service

Animals transported to stationary meat processing facility. This is still the most common method for turning animals into meat despite fuel costs, travel stress endured by the live animals, and time away from the farm for two round trips to slaughter facility. In most states, producer organizations and other groups are working to reduce travel time by building more inspected small-scale slaughterhouses. The [Foothills Pilot Plant](#) in North Carolina is this kind of traditional, stand-alone slaughterhouse. [Find a meat processor near you.](#)

On-farm slaughter service. Hooved livestock are dispatched by a licensed processor who comes to the farm. The processor transports the eviscerated carcasses to the meat handling facility for cut and wrap. On-farm slaughter spares animals the stress of travel and is convenient for the producer who doesn't lose time transporting animals to a slaughter house. Disposal of head, hide and offal can be the responsibility of either the producer or the processor, depending on their agreement.

While a red meat mobile processor takes the carcass back to a stationary facility for finishing, a mobile poultry processing unit takes care of everything from kill to chill right on the farm. The farmer pays the processor per bird and sometimes for mileage. In some cases the mobile unit's staff must also be paid,



but in other arrangements the farmers are trained to use the unit themselves. Depending on the agreement with the processor, the farm may also be responsible for supplying electricity, propane, waste disposal, and large quantities of potable water. In some cases a concrete slab and docking station must be built on the farm for the mobile unit.

Build Your Own?

After hiring a professional slaughter service for a few seasons, some producers expand their livestock operations to the point that building their own abattoir makes sense, especially if they land a contract with a chain of stores or restaurants. More decisions must be made — this time from the slaughterhouse *owner's* perspective.

Stationary or mobile? According to a recent [feasibility study by Georgia Organics](#), mobile units are more challenging than stationary facilities in terms of water capacity, cold storage capacity, and meeting sanitary regulations. While stationary facilities cost more to build, the wear and tear of travel increases maintenance costs on mobile equipment. Fuel costs for hauling the mobile unit to slaughter destinations also must be considered in budget comparisons.

However, the most important consideration may be the concentration of potential clients within a few hours drive of the unit's home base. Distance between slaughter stops and the number of animals processed at each stop can make the difference between success and failure of a mobile unit.

The [Island Grown Farmers Cooperative](#) in San Juan County, WA, built the first [USDA-inspected red meat mobile processing unit](#) in 2002 because it wasn't feasible to transport live cattle from the islands around Puget Sound to the mainland. In 1996 the producers approached their cooperative extension agent with the idea of a mobile unit. He grasped their vision and also brought in a community land trust to help with the legal logistics. The partners combined efforts to finance the unit from member fees, grants and donations without taking out a loan.

"It's definitely a going concern," say co-op manager Jim Wieringa. "Ten years into it, the unit goes out four days a week, and we are totally maxed out for space."

The cooperative has grown to approximately 65 small farms with no more than 60 miles between farms. A USDA inspector travels to the farms with the unit and the butchers. The unit brings the carcasses back to the plant in Bow, WA, where they are cut to each farmer's specifications, aged and frozen. Every farm does its own marketing under its own label, but members may also sell at the cooperative's retail store Northwest Homegrown in Bow. With no room for new members and with more customers seeking locally raised meat products, the co-op's next big decision will be about whether to expand.

Across the continent, another mobile unit hit some rough spots on its first venture. Vermont's Agency of Agriculture funded construction of a mobile poultry processing unit in 2008 to stimulate the pastured poultry industry. With input from poultry producers as well as food processors and other technical experts, the top-of-the-line facility was designed to process 250-300 birds per day. Then it was leased to an experienced and committed operator. Despite all of those advantages, the trips between farms were too long and the birds at each processing stop numbered too few for the venture to make money. The state put the unit up for auction. In January, 2012, Lila Bennett and David Robb of [Tangletown Farm](#) in Middlesex, VT, became the new owners. They are learning to use it by processing 4,000 of their own birds this season. As they become more proficient, they intend to process for other producers. For now they are content to have such a high quality plant for their own birds.

"The inspector has to watch only Lila and me instead of a number of people working in a larger plant," Robb says. "The attention to detail, and the quality of the inspection is unmatched."

Even though the [Cooperative Extension web profile](#) is out of date as to ownership and current use, it has a detailed breakdown of the costs and planning that went into this mobile unit.

Pastured poultry or grass-fed meat? Until recently most processors specialized in either red meat or poultry, but with the surge in demand more processors are offering both services. In fact, the recent [feasibility study by Georgia Organics](#) concluded that the most cost-effective way to start up a poultry processing plant was to add a poultry line to an existing red meat processing facility.

One red-meat processor taking the idea to heart is Tim Dyer of West Georgia Processing. Since 2009 his family has happily processed around 250 cows, sheep, goats and hogs per week for local producers. He recently received USDA approval for a chicken processing facility. It will be under the same roof as the red meat plant but separated from it by the retail store since Georgia Department of Agriculture regulations don't allow chicken and red meat to use the same equipment or interior space. Dyer looks forward to opening the plant next spring after the state has trained a number of inspectors.



"I'm a farmer who enjoys selling my own cows and pigs," he says. "But my heart is in the processing. I like providing a service to others."

Dyer sees chicken processing as just another stream of income during the warm season, but not something he could count on year round.

"Pastured chickens are seasonal," he says. "Even in our climate there are no chickens to process in the three coldest months. When poultry falls off during that time we can do repairs, streamline our operations, and keep on processing the cows year round."

Daniel Dover lives only two hours from Tim Dyer's facility. He already uses West Georgia Processing for turning pastured hogs into gourmet pork — about 20 of them this year. His farm should show more profit next year when he can cut his travel time in half.

Custom or Inspected? As the name implies *inspected meat* requires a state or federal inspector on site to evaluate each animal before and after slaughter. All retail cuts of meat sold in the United States must be inspected. However, there is a long tradition of selling "freezer beef" or other hooved livestock as whole carcasses or primal cuts without inspection of individual animals during the slaughter process. Even though most people think of hooved animals in connection with custom-exempt slaughtering, it is permissible for poultry as well.

The animals are sold live to one or more individuals. The producer collects payment before slaughter, and the processor cuts the carcasses according to the new owners' specifications. After cut and wrap (and aging in the case of beef), the new owner picks up their share of the frozen meat.

The custom slaughterhouse is inspected annually for sanitation and safety compliance; special labels prohibit the re-sale of the product. This is the easiest way for producers to add some value to their livestock without becoming retailers themselves. The limiting factor is the number of customers who have freezer space to store primal cuts of beef or many chickens.

Processing Is Not the Only Bottleneck. If slaughtering is out of the question, but you enjoy raising livestock and would like the benefits that grazing animals bring to a diversified farm, consider raising breeders or stockers for other producers. Broiler chicks and piglets suited for pasture are in short supply. Check with growers in your area for specifics such as the breeds, ages and type of management they prefer. [The American Livestock Breeds Conservancy](#) is also a good source of information.

As a farmer, whichever of these options you choose, you're fighting back against the huge, consolidated system of industrial meat production. As a consumer, whenever you buy meat from these farmers, you're supporting their efforts for raising livestock, and helping to bring down the prices they have to charge you.

Mysteries of Meat Inspection

A milestone document was released this year to help producers and communities decide whether to venture into processing. USDA's Economic Research Service published the very user-friendly, 24-page report [Slaughter and Processing Options and Issues for Locally Sourced Meat](#). Among other things, it clears up the confusing and seemingly arbitrary mysteries of meat inspection. Highlights are below, refer to the report for the fine points.

Federal inspection — Products from animals slaughtered under *Federal* inspection can be sold to individuals, restaurants and other food-related businesses, including across state lines. Each animal is inspected before and after slaughter by a USDA employee.

State inspection — Those same animals slaughtered under the watchful eye of a *State* inspector (rather than a Federal inspector) can only be sold within that state. This option has been shrinking as states dismantle their inspection programs, usually because of budget constraints. Only 27 states still offer red-meat inspection, and only 25 states offer both red-meat and poultry inspection.

Talmadge-Aiken inspection — Talmadge-Aiken slaughter facilities meet certain criteria and are allowed to use State inspectors (instead of Federal inspectors) acting on behalf of USDA's Food Safety and Inspection Service. Despite the fact that T-A product can be sold across state lines, only nine states participate in the program. [White Oak Pastures](#) and West Georgia Processing both use the T-A program.



Exemptions — As with other government regulations there are exemptions to some of the restrictions. For example, remember the regulation that only allows federally inspected meat to be sold across state lines? As of 2011 the [Cooperative Interstate Shipment Program for State-Inspected Meat and Poultry](#) allows state employees to act on behalf of USDA inspectors under certain circumstances. Those circumstances are



very specific, and by the end of June 2012 only four states — Ohio, Wisconsin, North Dakota and Indiana — were threading their way through the paperwork to get there.

Other long-established exemptions are used regularly by many growers. Two popular exemptions concern facilities and poultry.

Custom-exempt facility. A custom-exempt slaughter facility is inspected annually for sanitation and safety compliance, but inspectors are not on site during processing. Red meat processed in a custom-exempt facility can be sold “on the hoof” as whole carcasses, halves or quarters without each animal being inspected. Poultry can also be sold through custom-exempt processing.

On-farm poultry processing exemptions. Federal exemptions for on-farm poultry processing restricts the number of birds that can be processed annually and the types of markets they can serve. Some states don’t allow these exemptions even if producers qualify under the federal criteria.

The Federal Exemption that allowed Daniel Dover to process 5,000 birds a year on his farm gave him the opportunity to find out if he liked raising and selling chickens.

“It took me about two years to make all my mistakes,” he says. “and the exemption allowed me that time. States need to respect the Federal exemptions for growers who are just starting out. Without it there’s pressure to expand too quickly. That can destroy quality and reputation — not just that grower’s but the entire industry.”

If this brief summary of inspection and exemption regs gave you a headache, the legal calisthenics of meat processing will probably take the fun out of raising livestock.

However, if the definitions intrigued you enough to read through them several times looking for an inspection niche to fit your situation, you are serious about taking your livestock to the next stage. The following resources will be useful.

Other Resources

[Development Options for Small-Scale Poultry Processing Facilities in Georgia](#)

While the regulations for livestock processing differ from state to state, the issues addressed in this study conducted by Georgia Organics are universal — humane slaughter for the animals, safe working conditions for the staff, wholesome food products for the consumer — all conducted with minimum impact on natural resources. It’s an excellent resource for anyone interested in what questions should be asked when trying to decide whether to bring local meat processing to a farm or community.

[Niche Meat Processing Assistance](#)

This USDA Cooperative Extension Program web site includes guides to regulations, business plans, and much more. Very detailed case studies of small processors from coast to coast are invaluable to anyone considering processing their own livestock.

[Small & Very Small Plants](#) USDA Food Safety Inspection Service website created to assist the smallest meat processing plants.

[Sugar Mountain Farm](#)

In Vermont, used Kickstarter and other forms of social networking to fund a very small-scale hog butcher shop.

<http://www.motherearthnews.com/sustainable-farming/local-meat-processing-zmgz12onzphe.aspx>

