



United States Department of Agriculture



▲ *Mobile Slaughter: Are the Units on the Road to Success?*

Cover

Food Safety and Inspection Service

# Small Plant News



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## *Mobile Slaughter: Are the Units on the Road to Success?*

By *COMMANDER JEFF TARRANT, U.S. Public Health Service*



Since then, numerous mobile slaughter and processing units have been built and are operating in various locations throughout the United States. Most are federally or State inspected. Others, for poultry, operate under one of the Federal exemptions from inspection.

*“Mobile slaughter units provide ranching families with both affordable and local facilities for processing their animals. I support the use of these affordable units to help local ranchers develop niche markets and reduce transportation stress on their animals.”*

**Dr. Temple Grandin**

In 2002, the first mobile slaughter unit (MSU), approved by the U.S. Department of Agriculture’s (USDA), Food Safety and Inspection Service (FSIS), began operations in Washington State.

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## Background

From 2001 to 2010, the number of federally inspected meat and poultry slaughter establishments has decreased, in part because of industry consolidations. A 2009 Duke University study found that four corporations currently slaughter 75 percent of all cattle in the United States.

Within the last decade, the local food movement has exploded in the United States. Many consumers now factor in how livestock and poultry are fed and treated before they are slaughtered and processed in making their purchase decisions. As a result, consumers are often willing to pay more for products that meet their higher expectations, standards, or perceptions of quality.

Several factors have made it more difficult for small farmers and ranchers to get their animals slaughtered and processed locally and in a timely manner. Processors sometimes require farmers and ranchers to book appointments far in advance. In addition, these small producers are often in rural locations, far removed from the nearest slaughter facility, and can incur high transportation costs.

Consumers' shift in focus to how livestock and poultry are fed and treated has coincided with a cultural shift that's occurring within the USDA. Most notably in 2009, the Department launched the "Know Your Farmer, Know Your Food" initiative in an effort to "support the critical connection between farmers and consumers, and strengthen local and regional food systems."

In an effort to gauge how well MSUs are doing, we reviewed case studies of 10 mobile slaughter and processing units currently operating within the United States. The case studies were prepared by the Niche Meat Processor Assistance Network (NMPAN), (<http://www.nichemeatprocessing.org/>), a university-based community that supports local meat processing infrastructure and are accessible on the NMPAN Web site at <http://www.extension.org/pages/33160/mobile-slaughter-unit-case-studies#.VXXJiDYpD4Y>.

Because of space limitations, we're highlighting only one example. Please note; this example is not representative of all mobile slaughter operations.

### *Renewable Harvest/Ranch Foods Direct Mobile Meat Processing Unit*

In 2009, the Nebraska Environmental Action Coalition, a local affiliate of the Socially Responsible Agriculture Project, allocated \$200,000 towards the production of an MSU. The investment was an effort to assist local farmers and ranchers who were having difficulty finding nearby small meat processors for their animals.

The organizer of the project, Laura Krebsbach, worked out operational logistics and looked for someone to lease and use the facility. In addition, her team reorganized as a new non-profit organization called Renewable Harvest.

The unit was given a USDA grant of inspection in 2011. It was operated by Mike Callicrate of Ranch Foods Direct in Kansas for about a year. During that time, he designed and had constructed an additional MSU that is capable of slaughtering 20 head of cattle per day with a 4-person team.

"We are grateful to Laura's group for their assistance. The project would not have happened without the great team at the Socially Responsible Agriculture Project," said Callicrate.

The original unit is now used by Renewable Harvest as a demonstration, which farmers can use on a trial basis. In addition, Renewable Harvest will build MSUs at cost and develop Hazard Analysis and Critical Control Point (HACCP) plans for farmers and ranchers who develop solid business plans.

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“People call me all the time wanting to buy one, but most of them don’t have all the pieces they need,” Krebsbach said. “If you don’t have evidence of a real market for the meat; ownerships of, or guaranteed access to, an inspected cut and wrap facility; and a butcher who is qualified and willing to operate the MSU, then you will fail. We give people a major reality check.”

## Recommendations

Starting any business venture is risky. And, a mobile slaughter or processing unit is no exception. There are numerous factors at play.

Some initiatives are well planned and backed by solid business plans. Others are pieced together with a desire by local ranchers and farmers to keep local foods local. Regardless, any business venture can fail. With that said, we offer the following recommendations to individuals interested in starting their own MSU.

Before a prospective owner or operator goes down the path of starting his or her own mobile processing operation (or at least the paperwork), there are few things to do. One of them is learning from others who have walked the same path. These “lessons learned” can reduce a prospective owner’s or operator’s frustration level and possibly increase his or her chances of success.

After reviewing the case studies prepared by NMPAN, we noticed that a lot of people ran into the same issues, regardless of their geographic location or financial situation. So, we thought it might be best if we listed a series of questions prospective operators can ask themselves prior to starting their own MSU.

## Business Plan

- » Is there enough demand for the service to support it?
- » Is there committed throughput (livestock to processing) enough of the year to cover operational and fixed costs?
- » Do I have a solid business plan?
- » Are grants or low-cost loans available from USDA or elsewhere for the purchase of the unit?
- » Can I develop partnerships with non-profit organizations, farmers, and other like-minded

organizations to share the costs?

- » Can I create a reserve fund for the unexpected?

## Logistics

- » Are all components of the operation (e.g., processing, cut and wrap, storage, distribution) in place?
- » How will I provide electricity at the processing sites (e.g., gas-powered generator or electrical hookup)?
- » Is the unit constructed appropriate to my location and service area?
- » Can the vehicle traverse the service area (e.g., windy locations, dirt or mountainous roads, bridge weight/height limits)?
- » What are the State requirements for offal disposal/composting?
- » How much will it cost to maintain the vehicles?
- » Do I need to insulate the unit for winter use?
- » Should I get a stainless steel or aluminum unit for easier cleaning and longevity?

## Regulations/Partnerships

- » Have I met with Federal, State, and local regulators?
- » What are the Federal, State, and local requirements regarding potable water supply and waste water disposal in my area?
- » Who are the Federal, State, and local regulatory agencies, non-profit organizations, and other farmers (in my situation) who can work together towards a common goal (e.g., a safe and local food system)?
- » If these partners are identified, how should we communicate and collaborate?

Finally, the best piece of advice we can provide to prospective slaughter and processing unit owners or operators is “patience.” Most of the individuals who previously went down this path had to deal with several levels of government - Federal, State, and local. They were pioneers and were doing things that hadn’t been done before.

In addition, the State and Federal regulatory agencies didn’t know how to regulate them, since they often didn’t

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have any regulations on mobile slaughter and processing operations at the time. So, they had to work through a lot of unexpected issues. Consequently, they've helped cut a path for others to follow.

For more information on MSU regulatory requirements, visit FSIS' Website at: [www.fsis.usda.gov](http://www.fsis.usda.gov). For FSIS resources (Regulatory Education Video Seminars), visit: [www.fsis.usda.gov/wps/portal/fsis/topics/regulatory-compliance/regulatory-education-video-seminars](http://www.fsis.usda.gov/wps/portal/fsis/topics/regulatory-compliance/regulatory-education-video-seminars). Or, contact the FSIS' Small Plant Help Desk by telephone at 1-877-FSISHELP (1-877-374-7435) or email at: [InfoSource@fsis.usda.gov](mailto:InfoSource@fsis.usda.gov)

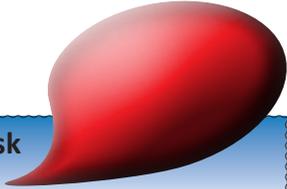
For information about MSUs, including presentations, regulatory and financial information, companies who build them, and videos showing MSUs in operation, visit: [www.nichemeatprocessing.org/mobile-unit-overview](http://www.nichemeatprocessing.org/mobile-unit-overview).

For information about challenges and opportunities related to local meat processing, including mobile units, see the USDA Economic Research Service Report: Gwin, L., Thiboumery, A. & Stillman, R. (2013). Local Meat and Poultry Processing: The Importance of Business Commitments for Long-Term Viability. Economic Research Report 150. Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of Agriculture. <http://www.ers.usda.gov/publications/err-economic-research-report/err150.aspx>.

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