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## The Salt

# Small-Scale Slaughterhouses Aim To Put The 'Local' Back In Local Meat

June 4, 2012 · 11:11 AM ET

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This cow may have been raised for food on a farm near you, but it may not necessarily have been processed nearby  
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It's hard to go a day without hearing people brag about how they eat local. In-the-know consumers wax poetic about their local farmers' markets, and some even make pilgrimages to meet their rancher, visit cows grazing and see pigs playing happily in the mud.

But the dirty little secret is, while that steak those "locavores" just bought at the farmers' market may have come from a cow that grazed in nearby pastures, it probably wasn't processed anywhere nearby. In fact, many local meat products are sent to slaughterhouses hundreds of miles away, across state lines.

So some small-scale cattle producers are taking matters into their own hands in an effort to keep money, jobs and something "local" on dinner plates.

In Washington state for example, most grass-fed beef raised on the eastern plains journeys some 400 to 600 miles to Oregon or Idaho for processing before arriving back in Seattle. That means not only a larger carbon footprint for each hamburger served, but processing animals out of state also sucks money out of the state's rural communities and makes locally produced beef more expensive.

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So the Cattle Producers of Washington (CpoW), like several other innovative groups around the country, are breaking ground this summer on a new slaughterhouse in Odessa (Lincoln County) that will cater exclusively to small eastern Washington ranches.

"We don't want to be the next Tyson or Cargill, processing large numbers of animals for national distribution," says Willard Wolf, President of CPoW. "We are not interested in competing on that level. The whole idea is to have quality control and humane processing for local cattle, hogs, sheep and goats that provides consumers in

the state with [the] locally produced products they are demanding. Having a producer-owned plan will help keep dollars, ranchers and farmers in our communities."

Forty years ago, when Wolf started working as a rancher in Eastern Oregon, there were seven slaughterhouses in the region able to process and package meat from small scale producers. Today there are none.

Over the past 20 years, slaughterhouse consolidation has left small scale producers scrambling. Just four corporations slaughter about 80 percent of the cattle in the United States. Many facilities now only process large numbers of animals at a time, and will not allow ranches to bring in – and get back out – the same animals.

This consolidation of farms and meat processing has meant even less jobs for already struggling rural communities like those in Eastern Washington. The construction of a new slaughterhouse will provide new opportunities for ranchers wanting to raise and sell pasture-raised meat at more competitive prices.

"We have lost 15 percent of our population over the last five years," says Wolf. "For a town that doesn't even have a stop light, a facility like this will mean significant employment in transporting, distributing and raising locally raised meat."

Other rural communities, like Sullivan County, New York, aren't looking to attract more people but want a new processing facility to help the county retain its agrarian feel.

"The rural nature of the county is a priority for us." says Jennifer Brylinski, the Executive Director of the Sullivan County Industrial Development Agency, the organization who helped the county secure funding for the future facility in Liberty. "We need the agricultural land here near New York City, and agriculture promotes tourism in this area. We want to see the farm land kept as farmland."

Only 90 miles from New York City, the proposed 5,000 square foot slaughterhouse will cater to many small scale ranches in the region. It's slated to sit on an otherwise undesirable location, sandwiched between the highway and the sewage treatment facility.

But for some ranchers, traveling to a regional processing plant is even too far.

Walter Jeffries of Sugar Mountain Farm in Vermont is pioneering what he calls a "nano-scale" animal processing, an on-farm slaughterhouse and butchering facility built for a fraction of the cost.

"When our butcher announced his retirement in 2008 after two other regional facilities burned down, we knew we had to build our own slaughterhouse on-farm," says Jeffries. "We were warned that it was a huge task to take on, that the costs were high. But we are on target for completing the first part of the building for only \$150,000, and are making all the plans available online to anyone else who wants to use them."

Mobile slaughterhouse units too are being used for very small scale processing of animals on-farm. It's a program the USDA has subsidized and promoted under the Obama administration. But the cost – upwards of \$300,000 a piece – can be prohibitive, and waste water management is also an issue.

The Jeffries family plans to compost waste for use on their own farm. "It is the ultimate green burial," says Jeffries. "We are recapturing the nutrients for our farm's soil - nutrients that are otherwise disposed of in landfills, burned or rendered. And while that might seem like a trivial detail, it is an essential part of keeping our soil healthy."

slaughterhouses   local food   meat

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