

Mobile abattoirs: Benefits and Challenges Part 2

By Jane Murrigan, M.Sc., P.Ag.

This is the second of two articles that discusses the potential for mobile abattoirs in Canada. [Part 1](#) appears elsewhere on this website.

Benefits of a mobile slaughterhouse

More and more consumers today are looking for locally-produced, humanely-raised and slaughtered, grass-fed, organic or “natural” meats, because they attach personal ethics to their purchasing power and/or believe there are health benefits for themselves and their families. A mobile abattoir that serves the needs of the producer, also translates into increased consumer access to high quality meat products in the local area, and offers them the opportunity to put their ethical beliefs into practice.

An outstanding benefit of mobile abattoirs is that the animals are subjected to a minimum of stress as compared with conventional pre-slaughter handling that often includes stressful loading, transport, mixing and crowding, and rough handling by humans unfamiliar to them. In the case of a mobile abattoir being operated in Washington State, a virtually stress-free kill occurs as the animals are handled by familiar people and in familiar surroundings.

Mobile abattoirs, traveling from farm to farm, can be used to slaughter all types of farm animals, including cattle, sheep, pigs, goats, poultry, as well as game farm bison, elk, reindeer and deer. In addition, they may be an excellent option for slaughtering cull cows, who otherwise may not be accepted by mainstream abattoirs because of age restrictions resulting from the BSE-crisis.

A mobile abattoir is an effective way for farmers to reduce animal stress before slaughter while also reducing hauling costs while offering greater flexibility for specialty meat products. The slaughter system can be easily modified to meet unique certification requirements, while also providing opportunity for specialty handling or cuts. This will become an attractive option for a new generation of entrepreneurs in agriculture.

Challenges

The biggest single obstacle may be the cost of the mobile unit, and the question of whether an individual or group could make the operation financially viable. Cliff Munroe, of Alberta Agriculture, estimates an initial capital cost of \$200,000 for a unit equipped to handle 8 head of cattle per day.

Next, there are regulatory obstacles that will have to be addressed. Currently, there is large variation by province in rules governing the operation of provincially-inspected

abattoirs in Canada. Federal inspection is standardized across the country, however, and the regulations are the gold standard to meet both domestic and world markets.

A mobile abattoir is a “kill and chill” facility, and as such it usually cannot refrigerate carcasses for longer than a day. To ensure consistent high-quality management of the carcasses in their transformation into premium meat products, it is therefore essential that government-inspected facilities for hanging carcasses, curing, cutting and wrapping also be available within a reasonable distance.

Disposal of the left-over by-products, known as offal, of the slaughter process, is an additional challenge. Some view this material as waste, and are concerned that it could be a health or environmental hazard if left on the farm, while others consider these byproducts to be valuable nutrients, that can be composted efficiently on the farm.

Conclusion

The success or failure of a Canadian prototype of a mobile abattoir will be watched with interest by small-scale producers, ranchers in remote locations, game farm operators, and government agencies alike. Benefits must outweigh the cost of meeting stringent new food-safety standards. The success of such a venture will integrate producer/consumer demand, cooperation among stakeholders, entrepreneurship, innovation, political will and a supportive bureaucracy.

This is a great opportunity for government regulators and niche marketers of value-added meat products to develop a new model of cooperation and innovation. Training, licensing and monitoring of abattoir operators, internet-assisted inspection technologies and proactive practices such as BSE-testing every carcass could be incorporated into the model. A state-of-the-art, multi-species, multi-use mobile abattoir that is federally inspected offers the most flexible service to producers. At the same time, it ensures more uniformly applied sanitation standards to on-farm killing than exists today in Canada. In addition, it offers the most humane method of commercial slaughter.

The time might just be right for government-inspected mobile abattoirs to take their place among other types of abattoir services for livestock producers in Canada.

(I thank Bruce Dunlop in Washington, Cliff Munroe in Alberta, Brian Ives in Nova Scotia and others for their expertise)

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Useful Links:

- 1.Lopez Island, Washington State site: http://www.lopezclt.org/sard/sjc_fpc.html
- 2.Lopez Island information contact Bruce Dunlop at (360) 468-4620 email: bdunlop@lopezislandfarm.com or Tom Schultz (360) 378-4414 email schultz@wsu.edu
- 3.EU contact : IRC (Innovation Relay Centres) website http://irc.cordis.lu/success/completesuccess.cfm?SUCCESS_ID=19
- 4.EU contact: All-Terrain Logistics Ltd or ATL Ltd <http://www.atlweb.net>
- 5.Wyoming project <http://www.ams.usda.gov/tmd/FSMIP/FY2003/WY0407.pdf>
- 6.Mobile micro-processor manufacturer in Alberta http://www.mobilemeats.com/index_en.html
- 7.Abitibi, Quebec project (in French) http://radio-canada.ca/regions/abitibi/nouvelles/200412/15/001-abattoir_mobile.shtml