

PRACTICAL PROCESSING

New slaughtering facility aims to help valley's livestock producers

Photos by Marcy Stamper



BY MARCY STAMPER

IT WAS EARLY MARCH, and Casey Smith had just returned from taking two dozen lambs to the closest federally inspected slaughter and processing facility, six hours each way on slick roads.

"It's a scenic drive, but super twisty and windy, with three mountain passes. Most processing is from December to March, when you're almost guaranteed to have snow or weather," said Smith, a fifth-generation meat producer at BCS Livestock outside Winthrop.

The trip to Chewelah, between

Twisp, but the business would have required many upgrades to pass USDA inspection. Double S Meats was already operating under USDA inspection for its wholesale business and is closer to most livestock producers in the county, according to the study.

After substantial vetting and a go-ahead from the board, the conservancy bought the unit this May for \$40,000 — about one-fourth of the cost of a new unit. Under a five-year agreement, Double S will pay the conservancy on a per-animal basis and can purchase the equipment at the end of the lease.

The conservancy also

obtained a grant to help Double S build infrastructure to permanently dock the unit, including holding pens and walkways that meet standards for low-stress animal handling, said Jumars. The city of Tonasket approved a special permit for the expansion.

"The more comfortable you can make the animals — every step of the process to the slaughter box — and the more relaxed and more humane it is, the less there are stress hormones, which affect flavor," said Jumars.

The conservancy will pick up the processing unit in the next few weeks. Double S expects to start processing meat early next year.

Appreciated options

BCS Livestock is enthusiastic about the new facility and the business opportunities it could open up. "If we had a local person, we could build a good relationship. We don't want to outsource," said Smith.

"We're lucky. People care about their food and where it comes from. There's a demand for locally raised meat, and that keeps going up," said Devin-Smith. "The farm-to-table movement has helped people open their eyes to where their food comes from, and chefs are changing their menus to use the whole carcass."

Other livestock producers in the Methow also welcomed the option of local slaughtering, even though few of those interviewed for this story said they're likely to use the facility themselves — at least not right away. Some are reluctant to change a business model that works, despite slim margins. Others are scaling back their farms.

Katie Haven and Bill Tackman raise about 40 sheep at McFarland Creek Lamb Ranch, where they sell whole and half animals directly to individuals under the state's "custom-exempt" inspection.

They'd like to sell to restaurants, but they

don't want to expand beyond their means. "As long as we have a steady customer base, this works," said Haven. "We sell out every year."

Up to now, Odessa has been the closest place to take their sheep for processing. "But we don't want to haul them. They're freaked out," said Haven.

Tackman grew up on a ranch and has the experience to slaughter the animals quickly and efficiently. "It's never a fun day. But the sheep are having a great life till the last second. We just think it's really humane," said Haven.

Vic Stokes runs a cow-calf operation near Beaver Creek. He sells calves to a processor in Toppenish, which brings the animals to the desired weight and has state-of-the-art facilities for handling. Although Stokes supports additional options for local meat producers, switching his system would be too great a financial risk, he said.

The meat business is complicated and marketing animals is difficult — trying to gauge what buyers want and when they want it, said Stokes. Grocery stores and restaurants want to be able to order meat every day, or as needed, he said.

Because cattle are so big — a finished steer carcass weighs about 800 pounds — the risk is greater than with sheep or goats, said Stokes. A cut-up sheep, about 35 pounds of meat, can fit in a milk crate. But few people have the space or need for even a quarter of a cow, and it's a lot of meat to lose if something goes wrong.

Most cattle ranchers in the county follow a similar cow-calf model, as opposed to raising cattle to sell as beef, according to the conservancy study.

Making the switch could also jeopardize his slot in Toppenish, said Stokes. "It's a competitive world," he said. "I'm not saying it couldn't be possible in the future, but I haven't been able to make the numbers work."

Moreover, large industrial processors use every part of the animal, including hides and innards. "The animal comes in alive, and they take everything but the 'moo,'" said Stokes.

Challenging economics

Local processing has been looked at so many times, but the moral is, it's so hard to make the numbers work," said Louis Sukovaty, co-owner of Crown S Ranch, which has raised cattle, hogs and chickens over the years. Although they'll continue to farm, Crown S is scaling back, said Sukovaty.

If the economics and timing worked, Sukovaty — who hauls his cattle three hours to a USDA facility in Basin City or Odessa so he can sell to stores and restaurants — said he'd be interested in local processing. The problem is competing with operations that run thousands of animals, he said.

Farming in the Methow is expensive because animals can't graze on pasture year-round. There's the cost of snowplowing

Custom-exempt and USDA inspection explained

"Custom-exempt" processing takes place at meat plants certified and inspected twice a year by the Washington State Department of Agriculture. Farms may sell custom-exempt meat only by the quarter, half or whole animal, and only to individuals who purchase the animal while it's still alive — not to stores or restaurants.

Facilities certified by the Food Safety Inspection Service (FSIS), a branch of the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA), are inspected daily. All animals slaughtered under USDA

inspection must be inspected live by an FSIS agent before slaughter. USDA-inspected meat can be sold by the cut to individuals, stores or restaurants.

Source: Methow Conservancy, "Assessing Needs and Opportunities: A Feasibility Study for USDA-Inspected Livestock Slaughter in Okanogan County, Washington" (2018). The research was supported by a USDA Rural Business Development grant, the Okanogan Conservation District and TwispWorks.

and shipping. And labor costs are higher here, said Sukovaty.

"Over and over again, it only works if you want to take a hit in your pocketbook," he said. "Even vegetable growers tend to bail, unless they have alternate incomes."

Gary Walker is an evangelist for goats, which he's been raising at Windmill Farm on Gold Creek for 15 years. "I really wanted to bring the knowledge of goat meat to the valley. It has a wonderful flavor and is good for you," he said. So Walker always hoped that USDA processing would become a reality, allowing him to supply restaurants and grocery stores.

"I studied the market, the geographic area, the customer base. I did all my homework — except I didn't realize the money is in selling to restaurants," said Walker, who found his main customers were Latino and Jamaican farmworkers. "They flocked to me. They couldn't get enough of it," he said.

Still, the economics were always uncertain. "In Portland, a restaurant sells a whole goat for \$45. I'm selling a whole goat for \$75," he said.

But Walker found a way to make things work — he cov-

erage piece of equipment — and lease it to a business — but it's also the first time the conservancy has supported an endeavor outside the Methow, said conservancy board president David Schooler.



"While it's a first, the board said it seems really natural," he said. The decision was unanimous.

The board was impressed by the research and the input from a countywide advisory committee of a dozen livestock producers. Jumars and the committee "dotted all the 'i's and crossed all the 't's. It made a lot of sense, although it's maybe a little out of the box for us," said Schooler.

Of the 9,000 acres in the Methow that the conservancy protects through conservation easements, 3,400 are devoted to agriculture, said Schooler. "Our easements are perpetual. Therefore, we have to have an interest in the success of the farms and ranches," he said. "The conservancy doesn't participate in the

Farming in the Methow is expensive because animals can't graze on pasture year-round and labor costs are high, said Louis Sukovaty of Crown S Ranch.



Casey Smith, left, and Betsy Devin-Smith of BCS Livestock take sheep over three mountain passes to the nearest federally inspected processor so they can sell lamb to restaurants.

Colville and Spokane, is hard on Smith — and on the sheep. Stress can cause the animals to lose weight and can affect the flavor of the meat, said Betsy Devin-Smith, Casey's mother and a long-time rancher and veterinarian. "It's a long way to transport animals to get them processed. We want to minimize the stress," she said.

Next year, those sheep — as well as cattle, hogs and goats — can be slaughtered, cut and wrapped in Okanogan County — under inspection that allows them to be sold to grocery stores and restaurants.

A unique collaboration between the Methow Conservancy and Double S Meats in Tonasket, the arrangement will give ranchers a local facility inspected by the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA), a requirement for selling individual cuts of meat to stores and restaurants. There are different USDA requirements for chickens.

The collaboration was an unexpected outgrowth of the conservancy's research last year into the needs of livestock producers. Researchers surveyed 92 ranchers. They described the need for local, USDA-inspected meat processing as "urgent," according to the study, which was conducted by the conservancy's agricultural coordinator, Alyssa Jumars.

So when the conservancy learned that a nonprofit in Stevens County was selling a used mobile slaughter unit, the organization looked for a local meat processor that might be interested in expanding.

The researchers considered Thomson's Custom Meats in



McFarland Creek Lamb Ranch treats its animals as humanely as possible, said co-owner Katie Haven. The ranch sells lamb by the whole or half directly to individuals.



ers his costs and gets retirement income from his previous career. Plus, he gets to be around goats. He even sleeps in the barn next to the goats when they're giving birth. "Goats are a very emotional animal, attached to the herd, to me, to each other," he said.

Walker wouldn't truck his goats to a facility where he'd have no control over what happened to them. "I couldn't live with myself if I did that. Here, they have the best life they can possibly have till the moment it's over," he said.

"I thought they wouldn't be successful getting a USDA facility nearby," said Walker, who's now downsizing his herd of more than 50 goats. He'll raise a few for his family and focus on other farm ventures, including garlic and U-pick pumpkins.

New direction for conservancy

Not only is it a departure for the conservancy to buy a

profits, but we want the land to stay productive and the valley to stay healthy."

The average age of farmers in the United States is about 58, said Devin-Smith. "If it were easy, everyone would be doing it," she said.

"Ranchers have to be really stubborn to stick with something that takes so much effort," said Sukovaty.

It's nice to know there will be the option of local processing, since she and Tackman may not want to do their own slaughter when they're older, said Haven at McFarland Creek Lamb Ranch.

People can see these animals eating in the pasture every day, versus an animal that goes to Kansas to eat corn, gets slaughtered in Colorado, and then ends up in your grocery store, said Smith.

"Wouldn't it be neat to be able to feed the people of the Methow Valley with food we grow — and not travel too far to process it?" said Devin-Smith.