

Farm-Based Businesses Help Boost Incomes

On-Farm Meat Packing Catches On

When the nearest packinghouse is 200 miles away, there's not much point in trying to direct market your beef, lamb or pork. That's why farmers in northwest Washington jumped at a chance to set up their own meat processing facility. Unlike most packing plants, this one is mobile. Slaughtering is done on the farm.

Island's Grown Farmers Cooperative has been in operation for about a year. It's already booked five to six months in advance.

"We haven't had any trouble keeping it running five days a week," says Bruce Dunlop, a co-op officer and farmer from Lopez Island, Wash.

The USDA-inspected packing plant slaughters beef, lambs, pigs and goats. It also chills and transports carcasses to a farmer-owned processor where meat is cut, wrapped and frozen. Offal is composted on the farm.

Dunlop served as project manager, working with the Lopez Community Land Trust to get the co-op up and running. Part of that effort entailed working with the Featherlite Company to design and custom build a fifth wheel trailer.

"This was a first for Featherlite," recalls Dunlop. "We went round and round on the design and specifications. We ended up with a totally self-contained unit."

The gooseneck trailer is 33 ft. long, 8 1/2 ft. wide and 13 ft. tall. Pulled by an F-450 diesel flatbed, the trailer contains processing, refrigeration and storage sections. The truck and trailer cost the cooperative approximately \$150,000.

The mobile processing unit literally pulls into a field and goes to work immediately. An on-board 10 kW diesel generator provides power for everything including a cooler, while a tank holds 300 gal. of water. The cooler can hold up to 10 steers, 40 lambs or 20 hogs. Once in place, up to 20 lambs can be processed in a single day.

The co-op has proven successful enough that a second group of farmers in Okanogan County, Wash., is looking to duplicate their success.

One difficulty Dunlop's group faced was finding skilled butchers and meat cutters.

"We were fortunate to find a butcher who is very good," he recalls. "I think the entire industry is suffering from a lack of not only butchers, but also skilled meat cutters who can break down a carcass."

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Farmers in northwest Washington set up their own mobile meat processing facility. Slaughtering is done on the farm in a 33-ft. long gooseneck trailer that contains processing, refrigeration and storage sections.



Chicken Pick'n Trailer Is A Boon To Business

Pick'n a chicken clean is no sweat when you do it in an 8 by 48-ft. refrigerated trailer.

Deck the trailer out like Tom and Ruth Neuberger did theirs, and pick'n chickens is almost a treat. With four workers on the line, they can pick, process, bag and freeze 300 cluckers per day.

Speed and efficiency is necessary when you raise and direct-market more than 4,000 chickens, ducks, geese and turkeys plus beef, lamb and pork each year. The Neuberger's own and operate South Dakota Poultry Headquarters in Canistota, S.D. The poultry is raised free range. Beef cattle and sheep are grass fed. Hogs are on grass, but also get some grain. All animals are raised free of GMO feeds, antibiotics and growth hormones. Meat is sold at farmers' markets in the area and also delivered to central locations around the state where customers pick up their orders.

A nearby slaughter plant processes the four-footed animals, but the Neuberger's have always processed their own poultry. The idea of adapting a used trailer to processing farm-raised birds came from neighbors who use them for pig nurseries. Tom found he could get a road worthy trailer with a working freezer unit for \$3,000. That was a steal compared to building a processing facility or remodeling an existing building for pressure washing and cooling.

Before adding processing equipment, the Neuberger's had to install wiring and plumbing and pour a shallow cement floor over the aluminum floor rails for cleaning purposes. The trailer floor slopes toward the front, allowing waste water and blood to naturally drain into a tank. From there, it is pumped to another tank on a farm truck and spread on the farm's pastures. Offal is

composted and later spread as well.

Federal poultry meat inspectors were a big help, says Ruth. "They really helped us get set up and made sure we were doing it right," she recalls. "They answered any questions and were with us all the way."

The Neuberger's estimate they have invested \$32,000 in the trailer and processing equipment, including an eviscerating line. The shoulder-high eviscerating line makes handling the birds easier and keeps everything more sanitary.

After birds are killed and cleaned in the trailer, they are moved to a nearby converted garage where some are cut up, smoked, ground or otherwise further processed. Everything is bagged and frozen.

Further processing has proven to be a real moneymaker for the couple. "We used to sell blemished birds at a lower price," recalls Ruth. "Now we make gourmet chicken patties, which I flavor with fruits and vegetables I raise. Another product is Chicken Sticks. We figure we could make a lot more money if we did nothing but them."

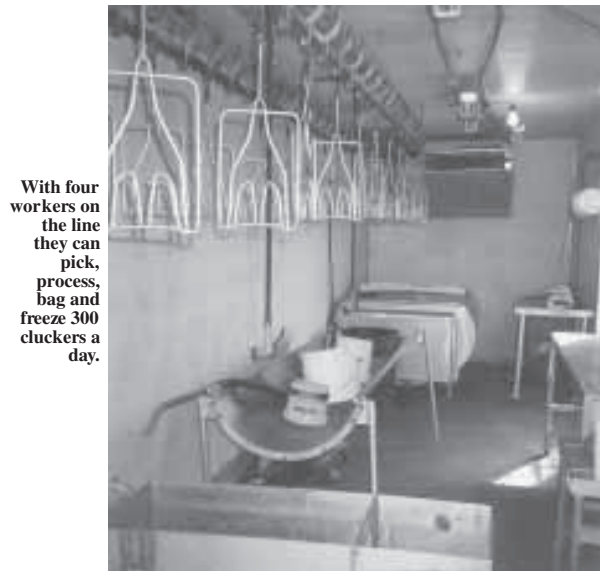
The Neuberger's have built up a strong demand for their high quality, home raised meats as well as feather and down pillows and comforters. Their only concern is their age.

"At 72 years, we need to be thinking about getting out," says Ruth. "The business is growing so we need help, someone to take over. We have a lot of customers that would be disappointed if we went out of business."

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Tom and Ruth Neuberger raise and direct-market thousands of chickens, ducks, geese and turkeys each year. Processing is done inside this 8 by 48-ft. refrigerated trailer.



With four workers on the line they can pick, process, bag and freeze 300 cluckers a day.