

# Hot Meat Market Leads To On-Farm Slaughterhouse

By Jim Ruen, Contributing Editor

When people started knocking at their door asking to buy sheep, Joe and Becky Blystone knew the market for fresh meat was growing. To turn their 30-ewe flock into a profitable business, they expanded to 350 ewes and went to accelerated lambing, with the goal of lambing at 7-month intervals instead of 12. They also added a flock of 60 meat goat does.

"We started with Corriedale ewes, added some white face commercials, Dorset and Finn and Dorper (South African hair sheep) ewes and went to intensive grazing," says Joe Blystone.

They turned to Polypay and Dorset bucks for their out-of-season breeding potential, while Suffolk bucks were crossed for a bigger frame. Dorper bucks were used to reduce shearing. Replacement ewe lambs were selected for out-of-season breeding first and meat production second.

A few years ago, when lamb prices had fallen, the Blystones looked for a way to add more value to the business. Recognizing that their customers needed a place to slaughter their animals led the Blystones to consider building a slaughter facility. They discussed it with a friend of theirs, Professor Henry Zerby, who runs the meat lab at Ohio State University.

"Mike Link, the district supervisor of meat inspection, was real helpful too," says Blystone.

They also worked with the local NRCS (Natural Resources Conservation Services) office to develop plans to handle the wastewater. These plans had to be okayed by the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA). Getting approval was the only real hold up. Even though smaller existing slaughter facilities could use a septic tank and drain field, the EPA finally decided the Blystones had to use a holding tank and apply the

wastewater onto different fields.

Today, they are selling more sheep and goats than ever, including lambs, goat kids, cull ewes and goats purchased at a local livestock market and resold, all for a premium. What the customers are getting for their added cost is meat from a state-approved and inspected, 1,000-sq. ft., on-farm, custom slaughter facility.

"In the first 12 months with the new facility, our business has increased every month," says Blystone. "We set out to sell everything we produced here at a premium, and we easily did that. We don't produce nearly enough animals to meet the demand."

The growth has been virtually all word of mouth, with Joe and Becky handing out business cards and flyers to customers. What drives their market is African immigrants, both Ethiopian Eastern Orthodox Christians and Muslims, living in nearby Columbus, Ohio. Hispanics also are a growing customer segment. Where once they drove up the Blystone driveway asking to buy a lamb, now they go buy their lambs, sheep and goats elsewhere and pay a premium to slaughter them in an inspected, sanitary facility. Built to handle 6 animals at a time, some days customers wait in line to use the facility.

"I think their thought is that if they can come here and pick out an animal, it will be fresh," says Joe Blystone. "If they buy meat in a store, they don't know how old it is, and in the case of beef, it has all been aged. Immigrants really look down at frozen meat."

When the Blystones opened their slaughter facility, most of their customers killed their animals themselves. Joe soon added a meat saw to cut up the carcass for them after they had slaughtered it. Many of the African customers followed traditional religious rules of slaughter. The animal's throat is cut to drain as much blood as possible from the carcass.



Photos courtesy of Kyle Sharp, Ohio's Country Journal

"We don't process nearly enough animals to meet the demand," says Joe Blystone, who with his wife Becky have a state-approved and inspected, 1,000-sq. ft., custom slaughter facility.

The method, called Halal in Islam, is very similar to the Jewish Kosher tradition. Researchers studying animal brain waves have found animals slaughtered this way exhibit no pain compared to stunning where pain is exhibited and much more blood remains in the carcass.

Both Joe and a butcher the Blystones have since hired to help handle the increased business, offer to slaughter animals the ritual way. Some customers continue to prefer to do their own and others are very particular about how carcasses are handled.

"Some Muslims will be real touchy about their meat laying where a Christian's meat was laying or two carcasses touching, so we respect that," says Blystone.

Blystone's only regret with his facility is that he built it to handle small carcasses of sheep and goats. "A lot of my customers are asking about beef," he says. "If doing it today, we would have constructed the building with a rail for hanging the carcass higher so we could handle beef too."

One change he is making is to build a separate holding facility for animals bought at market. "Disease is always a concern, and we are working to separate the purchased animals from our own flock," says Blystone.



Many customers are African or Muslim immigrants, or Hispanics living in Columbus, Ohio.

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## Custom-Built Sheep and Goat Milking Carousel

Paul E. Fisher of Newburg, Penn., custom-builds sheep and goat milking carousels.

This unique piece of dairy barn equipment saves farmers a lot of steps and time, because they can remain stationary while the round turntable brings the next animal to them.

"We first built a carousel for ourselves to use, and we really like it, so I decided to do custom orders for other people," Fisher says. "Ours milks 8 sheep, but I can make them bigger. With goats, you might want to go as big as a 12 or 14 animal capacity."

Fisher says his own 8-sheep table is 10 ft. in dia., and is 6 ft. off the ground in the center where the headlocks are located.

The system has a sturdy steel tubing frame and the platform is made from rubber matting on a steel base.

Sheep access the carousel by way of a built-in ramp, unless the carousel is located in a sunken milking parlor pit.

"You can buy straight-row parlors for sheep and goats, but I don't think anyone else sells a round turn-table type in the U.S.," he says. "They're available overseas, and we saw a picture of one and liked it, so we just figured it out how to build one on our own. I'd say they're ideal for people milking a herd of 15 or more sheep or goats."

Depending on what is ordered, the platform can either be turned automatically by a motor, or simply manually advanced. Every unit includes either a built-in vacuum line for buckets, or a pipeline system. The vacuum pump can also be included if desired.

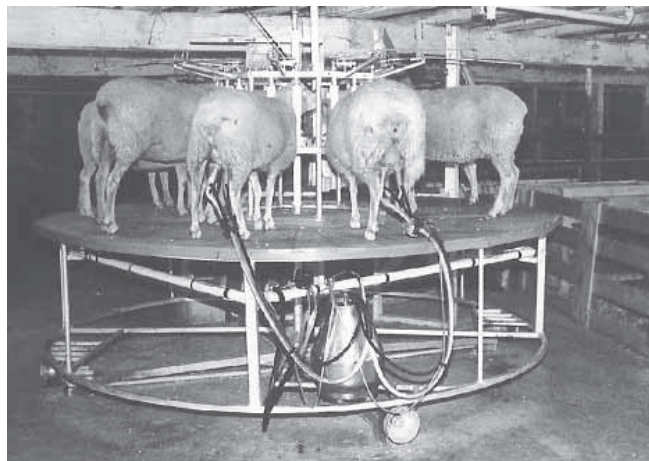
The carousel that Fisher uses on his own farm is set up for bucket milking. Once the platform is filled with animals, he starts putting on the milking machines. The buckets sit under the platform, on a base that's part of the carousel frame.

As he finishes putting on each milker, Fisher turns the platform and moves on to the next sheep. By the time he has advanced to the last sheep, the first one is done or close to being done milking, so the turn table continues to be advanced while he begins removing the milkers in preparation for the next set of animals.

The completed carousel is constructed in several sections, and they need to be assembled after shipping.

In most cases, he can build a milking carousel in six weeks, and welcomes calls requesting price estimates.

Contact: FARM SHOW Followup, Paul E. Fisher, 16957 Cumberland Hwy., Newburg, Penn. 17240 (ph 717 423-5680).



Paul E. Fisher's milking carousel has a steel tubing frame and a steel plate platform covered with rubber matting. Sheep access the carousel by way of a built-in ramp.

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