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FOOD

FIELD REPORT: A MOVABLE BEAST

A new slaughterhouse on wheels hopes to satisfy the hunger for local meat in the Northeast.

BY CHRISTINE MUHLKE

The only indication that I was outside a slaughterhouse was the blood dripping from a pipe jutting out of a pristine white trailer. I'd driven right past the Lego-like set-up — a refrigerated semi-trailer with a half-trailer and a delivery truck stuck onto it — parked behind Eklund's old farm-machinery shop in Stamford, N.Y. With a former Hollywood trailer situated nearby, I took it for a movie set. But I was looking at the first mobile slaughterhouse for large animals in the Northeast.

It was hard to believe that these four innocuous-looking components may well be the answer to the prayers of livestock farmers.

Organic, grass-fed meat is much in demand in Manhattan restaurants, but little of it is local. It's not that Hudson Valley farmers aren't raising it. Who wouldn't want the extra 25 cents per pound that a 900-pound organically raised cow can bring? But when it comes time to kill (or "harvest") their animals, farmers have only four slaughter facilities available in the area to go to.

Instead, they drive to Pennsylvania or Massachusetts to plants that can process more than 1,700 cattle a day — when they can get a slot. "They have to schedule appointments 9 to 12 months in advance," said Judith LaBelle, the president of Glynwood, a nonprofit in Cold Spring, N.Y., that focuses on sustaining the regional food system. "Because they're raising them outside, they don't have as much control over their growth as other people do on feed lots. So even if the animal's not their optimal weight or condition, they have to keep their appointment." The farmers must then return to pick up the meat, which can no longer be certified organic.

It's understandable why so many livestock farmers have transitioned to dairy or poultry. If you're going to raise your animal as humanely as possible, do you really want it to die on an assembly line?

The fact that regional slaughterhouses were the missing link in the supply chain was no secret among farmers. So in 2008, the task force at Glynwood began researching how to build a plant that could be moved to selected docking sites around the Hudson Valley, a portable abattoir able to be replicated anywhere in the country.

By the time Glynwood's unit was ready for the regulators, the United States Department of Agriculture was more open-minded about helping farmers trying to build infrastructure. Secretary of Agriculture Tom Vilsack told me his goal is to help repopulate rural America by creating more market opportunities for small farmers and strengthening the connection between local supply and demand. "We have to make sure that producers are capable of getting critical mass to meet consumer demand," he said.

In mid-April, the Modular Harvest System, or M.H.S., received U.S.D.A. approval, making it one of a handful in the country.

"The hardest part was being the first to do this," said Joan Snyder, a Wall Street investment banker turned sheep



Bill and Jim Eklund receive cattle near their farm in Stamford, N.Y. the next day, the cows will be led into the Modular Harvest System (behind Bill) to be processed.

farmer. She now heads LILA, or Local Infrastructure for Local Agriculture, which is the nonprofit owner of the M.H.S. and the manager of the project. (The Eklunds — Bill, Bill Jr. and Jim — act as the operating company; if you call LILA's 800 number and press 2 for slaughter-scheduling, you'll be transferred to Jim.)

"We had no models to follow," Snyder said. "We were trying to miniaturize what is a very complex process and still keep it able to be legal on the road. It's so well choreographed in there. It's like the Rockettes: you can't step out of line because you'll bump into somebody's saw."

Yes, you will. The kill trailer is 8 feet wide and 53 feet long. In that space a cow, lamb or goat is stunned, killed, bled, skinned and eviscerated. The organs are rolled into the adjoining inedible parts trailer, to be composted or picked up by a renderer for disposal. The carcass is sawed in half and washed with a lactic-acid solution before it's moved to a chilling compartment. Later, it will be transferred to the connecting refrigerated delivery truck, which can drive off to the nearest "cut and wrap" facility, or butcher. During the entire process, a U.S.D.A. inspector — in the Eklunds' case, a ponytailed woman with a warm smile — stands in the kill trailer.

I wasn't allowed in during a kill, but I was able to watch the Red Devon cow I'd just admired in the holding area be led calmly up the ramp and into the trailer. The wild thrashing that followed triggered primal fear and sadness, which caught me off-guard considering that I'm that obnoxious meat hipster who serves pickled pigs' tongues at her wedding. Silence. Then blood began trickling from the pipe. When I entered the gory trailer at the end of the day, the quarters of four cows dangled neatly in the cooler.

LaBelle expects the demand for local processing to grow once farmers (and chefs) know about the M.H.S. "There may be a place that starts out with a mobile unit that at some point may say, 'Gee, we have enough to be able to do a high-quality plant on our own now,'" she said. "We would declare victory and leave the field."

The Eklunds, who are fourth-generation organic dairy farmers, were building a meat-processing plant when Glynwood contacted them. They said the response from farmers has been tremendous and positive. Even before they opened the M.H.S., they knew they'd made an impact.

"We had a farmer drive here over an hour," said Jim, a sturdy, fast-talking 29-year-old with fresh guts on his boots. "He said: 'I just wanted to see for myself. I sold my cows off three years ago. Couldn't get 'em processed in a timely manner. It cost me too much to keep up. Saw you're doing this. Think this is great. I'm gonna go home and buy cows again.'"