

Mapping Mobile Slaughtering: An Interview With Judy LaBelle

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The growing demand for locally raised, pasture-fed meat is confronted by a lack of high-quality, humane, and regional processing plants. Even the USDA has gotten involved in identifying where outreach is most needed, by helping to build or maintain local slaughtering facilities. The agency just released an updated version of slaughterhouse maps that target local processing establishments. (The re-release can be found [here](#) [PDF].) But well before this week's map release, organizations like [Glynwood](#) set out to understand and assess the need for mobile slaughterhouse units in the Hudson Valley region of New York. Working since 2008 to address the obstacles that have prevented the construction of adequate facilities to serve small to mid-size farmers, the organization created a modular mobile slaughterhouse—their [Modular Harvest System](#) (MHS). Civil Eats spoke with Judy LaBelle, President of Glynwood, to find out more about the first and only modular mobile slaughterhouse in the U.S.

CE: What was the strategy/process involved in creating the MHS Task Force and when did the idea for a mobile slaughterhouse originate?

JL: The fact that smaller producers have had a difficult time reaching the growing market for regional meats because of the lack of slaughtering capacity has been recognized for several years. Glynwood decided to take the lead in addressing this problem and created a Task Force in 2008. After initial analysis revealed the difficulties inherent in creating new stationary slaughterhouses in our region, we turned our attention to the possibility of a mobile solution.

CE: What are the main USDA requirements for a mobile slaughterhouse? And what does “operational flexibility” boil down to?

JL: There are seven basic steps for applying for federal meat inspection, all of which were recently published by the USDA in a [new compliance guide for mobile slaughterhouses](#) [PDF]. In designing a mobile slaughterhouse for the Hudson Valley region, operational flexibility translated to creating a design that fit the needs of the region. The region has many small farms dispersed over a long distance, so having the unit travel to each individual farm was not the most efficient method to reaching a larger group of farmers—any one of which is not likely to have enough animals to process on a given day for optimal operation of the unit. That approach also entails the time and expense of moving the unit every day, which is inefficient and costly.

In addition, laws relating to the disposal of offal and waste water may vary by county or municipality. The MHS design addresses this key issue: the in-unit slaughter allows capture of blood, waste water, and offal separately in the inedible trailer; then, this independently movable trailer allows disposal of these wastes to appropriate facilities without having to move the entire

unit. Another plus is that the independent refrigerated truck can deliver processed meat to a cut and wrap facility or per a farmer's request, again avoiding the need to move the main unit.

CE: The MHS model is built upon “efficiency” and “economy.” What were Glynwood’s costs for designing and executing this unit, and what will farmers have to pay for your services?

JL: When you pioneer a new product, it is difficult to separate related project costs for being “the first” from the actual design and execution costs. Perhaps the better answer is what we estimate the cost for replicating the MHS unit to be. And that is about \$750,000. Farmers pay a rate equivalent to market rate for processing services in the region, which may vary with the season. Currently, the Stamford location charges between \$40 and \$70 per animal, depending on their size. If the farmer wants delivery, there is an additional charge.

CE: What is the long-term vision for mobile slaughterhouses?

JL: Our goal is to have additional docking station sites identified in the Hudson River Valley (HRV) region by the end of 2010 and five docking stations in place by the end of 2011. Studies of producers in regions like the HRV, where there are dispersed smaller producers, have determined that many producers will increase their herds if they know that they can more efficiently access processing. Over time, this additional production may lead to sufficient demand to support either an additional mobile unit within the region or even a small stationary plant. If so, that would be a welcomed development, and the schedule or system of docking sites would be adjusted accordingly to shift the capacity where it was most needed. The more pastured livestock, the more viable the producers, the greater contribution to local economies, and the better opportunity to maintain the high quality landscape. Our larger scale vision includes the replication of the MHS in other regions with similar characteristics and needs. We hope to work with communities across the country who wish to replicate the MHS unit for their region.

CE: The MHS is the first modular unit of its kind, but there are five other mobile slaughterhouses west of New Mexico. Can you explain what modular means here to differentiate from the other mobile units in the U.S.?

JL: The important distinction is that the other mobile slaughterhouses are a single trailer, and these types of mobile slaughterhouses do not have the ability to slaughter large animals inside their units. The MHS is a next generation design, which is comprised of four individual pieces or “modules” that fit together to make a complete, portable facility. A 53-foot trailer provides for inside-unit slaughter, carcass preparation and chilling; A refrigeration truck rails quartered sides or whole carcasses after they are chilled and then delivered to a “cut and wrap” facility or as per instruction by each farmer; A mobile “inedible parts” trailer detaches from the main unit for hygienic disposal of offal, manure, and other waste; and a small office trailer with amenities required by USDA is provided for its inspector as well as MHS employees. In the future, we anticipate adding other modules, possibly for specific species like pigs that would be interchangeable with some parts.

CE: Do you put a limit on travel time from farm to slaughterhouse? How long are the animals in the unit before slaughter?

JL: No, we do not put a limit on travel time, but once the system of regional docking sites is completed, many producers will have the option of traveling significantly shorter distances.

Animals are in the unit itself for literally a minute or two before slaughter. The animals are delivered to the docking site the day before they are slaughtered and kept in holding pens for less than 24 hours. The holding pens have been designed to meet all USDA requirements.

CE: Who conducts the slaughter? Must there always be a USDA official on-site?

JL: Eklund Meat Process LLC is the MHS operator. The owners also happen to own a dairy farm. Anyone that is hired to work in the unit must be rigorously trained and ideally experienced with slaughter. Yes, a USDA inspector must be on site when the unit is in operation and processing meat for general sale. The operator must provide adequate notice of their operating schedule. We do not anticipate that this will create a problem when the MHS begins to rotate through the region. Per USDA requirements, the Inspector has a dedicated office, shower, etc., in a trailer that travels with the MHS.

CE: In your livestock utopia, what is the optimal scenario for these units' reach? What could Northeast meat production look like?

JL: Studies of the need for additional processing capacity in the Northeast indicate that a significant number of farmers would produce more animals if they were confident they would have efficient access to a high quality slaughter facility. So our livestock utopia envisions a region where there are sufficient MHS units (or eventually, perhaps, stationary facilities) to allow for the growth of small livestock farm operations to keep pace with the growing demand for locally grown, pastured beef, pork, and lamb.

In addition, we are proposing that communities wishing to support their farmers consider developing docking sites that would also function as “nodes” where a number of “community food enterprises” (CFEs) could be clustered, facilitating ease of marketing and distribution. The CFEs may include meat aging and butchering facilities, cold storage for fruits and vegetables, and community kitchens for value added products. In this way, the MHS serves as a catalyst to strengthen the entire regional food system.

CE: Can we truly exist without factory farms—and how long do you think it will take to see their disappearance?

JL: Yes, we can exist without factory farms. Currently, factory-farm meat is cheaper because of a confluence of factors, including cheap oil (to produce fertilizer and feeds and move those and animals long distances); subsidies for commodity crops used to feed animals in “factory” operations; and public policies that allow the “externalization” of the environmental impacts of factory farming and the use of antibiotics (on which humans rely) to manage animal health in unnatural “factory” conditions. Were one or more of these factors to change substantially, factory farms would begin to reflect its true cost, and they would become less economically feasible.

And if these factors change, the playing field would become more level for smaller livestock producers who don't benefit from subsidies and who do operate in environmentally sound ways, as the cost of factory meat and sustainably raised meat began to equalize. Relative cost would no longer be the driving force behind consumer support for factory-farmed meats. The American diet might change as a result, with Americans eating less meat. But many who are concerned about public health and the cost of our health care system already call for Americans to reduce the amount of meat they eat. My crystal ball is cloudy. But as Nassim Nicholas Taleb writes in

The Black Swan: the Impact of the Highly Improbable: “History and societies do not crawl. They make jumps.”

CE: Is the approval of mobile slaughterhouses enough to change our entire meat production system?

JL: The approval of mobile slaughterhouses isn't enough to change the entire system, but it is evidence that there is a groundswell of demand for good meat—and that could change the system. Meeting that demand requires slaughterhouses, though they are only one element of the processing, marketing and distribution chain needed to connect the farm to the fork. However, slaughterhouses are perhaps the most difficult and challenging piece of the supply chain to create—from both the regulatory and business perspectives—so the approval of this mobile unit confirms that there is real possibility for alternatives, and there is a future for smaller livestock producers.

CE: How difficult was the MHS process to complete?

JL: It is always a challenge to be the first to undertake a complicated task that many have grown accustomed to thinking cannot be done. We are fortunate that our effort to design a unit that would meet USDA regulations coincided with a new policy thrust within USDA to support all farmers, which includes the [Know Your Farmer, Know Your Food](#) effort, which encourages regional food systems. No corners were cut during the review process, but no unreasonable road blocks were thrown up, either, as many had anticipated would be the case.

And while we view the licensing of the MHS as a significant accomplishment and contribution to the region's agricultural infrastructure, we also view it as the initial step of what will be an evolutionary process as the demand for its services grows and the region's food system strengthens.

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