

# One-Stop Shop

**USDA-approved portable abattoirs and a hub marketing model take beef from pasture to plate in one step.**

Story by  
**ED HAAG**

During the last eight years, niche-marketing beef in Washington State has gotten a whole lot easier. With portable U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA)-approved abattoirs now operating at both ends of the state (four in total), a growing number of calf producers are making the decision to pass on the conventional sale-at-weaning approach in favor of retained ownership and niche-marketing strategies that promise a greater return per input dollar.

Natural, organic and grass-finished beef are just three of the rising niche-market stars. While the total number still pales when compared to the 30 million conventionally finished and harvested animals, the 40%-per-year growth rate reported in the *Nutritional Business Journal* in these niche markets since the turn of the century is extraordinary.

One survey involving grass-fed beef confirmed that the number of domestically raised cattle marketed in the category has jumped from 5,000 in 2000 to 60,000 in 2006.

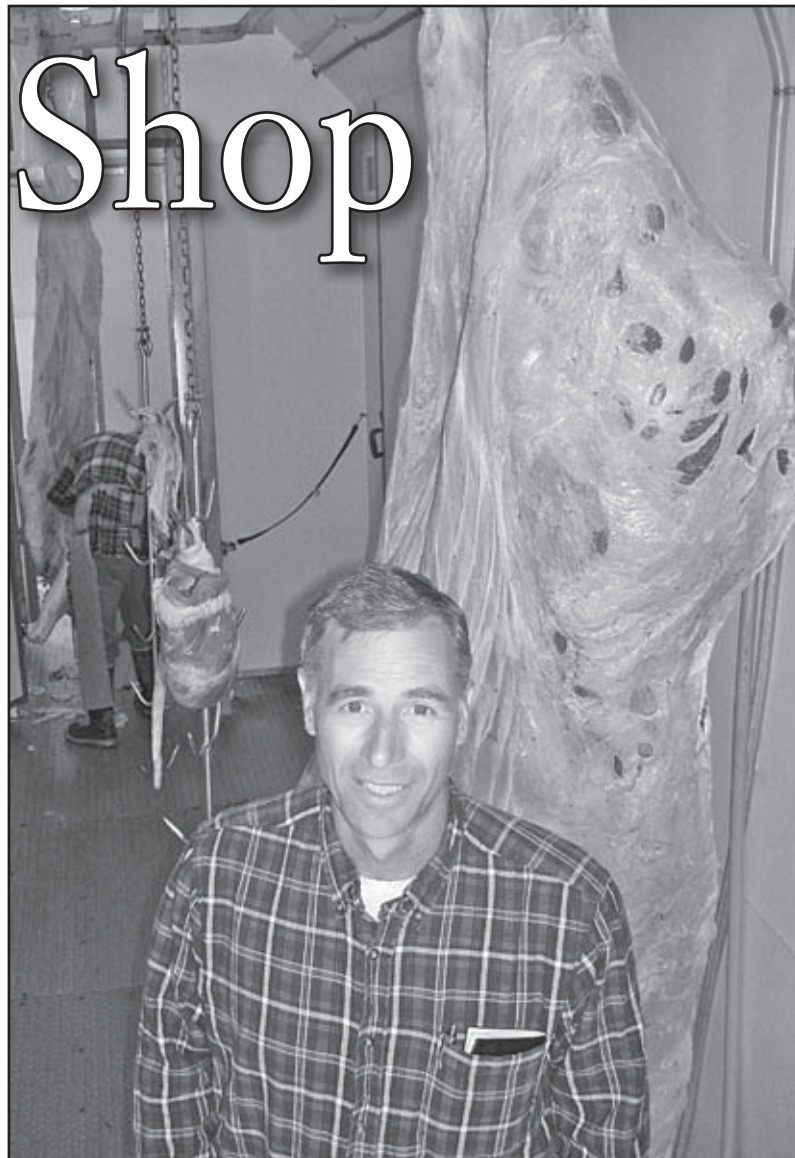
Locally raised beef with ranch-of-origin labeling and

beef associated with guaranteed humane rearing, transporting and harvesting procedures are also gaining a consumer following in the Northwest.

If there is a single entity that lends itself well to all of these emerging niche markets, it is the portable abattoir, says Joel Huesby, grass-finished beef producer and owner of the country's largest USDA-approved mobile harvest facility.

Operating from his ranch near Walla Walla, Wash., Huesby harvests and processes up to 30 animals a day — usually a combination of cattle, sheep and hogs. Built on a 53-foot (ft.) tractor-trailer frame, his portable abattoir, pulled by a conventional diesel semi, services a range of niche-market customers throughout central and eastern Washington. Since receiving its federal grant of inspection, Huesby's abattoir has processed more than 3,000 head of livestock with an average use of one and a half days a week.

"I direct-marketed 285 head of beef through our facility last year," he says, noting that he would like to triple the time his abattoir is in use as his customer base grows. Huesby sells retail pasture-finished beef to buyers' clubs primarily in the Seattle area.



Joel Huesby's 53-foot mobile abattoir offers a pass-through processing system from stunning to carcass cooling.

He explains that while the task of segregating, for processing, small numbers of niche-market cattle, has proved impractical in most conventional USDA-inspected, large-volume packinghouses, the smaller-volume portable units are well-suited to the task.

"What this unit and others like it have done for local producers like me is to open retail markets that otherwise would be denied by Federal regulation," Huesby says.

That said, no one should assume that there is major money to be made in harvesting and processing cattle, Huesby says. He adds that the low profit margins that have always dogged the livestock processing industry are still the norm.

"For us, the processing is part of a holistic way of thinking about a vertically integrated direct-market business," he says. "It is a means to an end and not an end in and of itself."

He is convinced that in order for such an operation to be successful financially, a viable long-term market must be in place; preferably one that is easily accessible and locally based.

## A local phenomenon

Huesby's view regarding the role the portable abattoir plays in

a vertically integrated marketing strategy is not unique. That is precisely what Bruce Dunlop, farmer and long-standing member of the Island Grown Farmers Co-op of Lopez Island, Wash., envisioned when he and his organization built the first USDA-approved portable abattoir in the country almost a decade ago.

"Our goal in building the unit was to be able to sell the meat we raise in our community," he says. "It has proven to be very effective in doing just that."

Last year 1,200 head of livestock — cattle, pigs and sheep — were processed by the Co-op's portable facility.

Tom Schultz, Washington State University (WSU) Extension agent for San Juan County and a participant in the project from the outset, agrees.

"This system gets local beef into the hands of local consumers while allowing the livestock producer to leave out the middleman who is making most of the money in agriculture these days," Schultz says.

He sees this unit as particularly relevant to those producing a grass-finished product. Without having to ship their animals to feedlots for finishing, the rancher can exercise



Huesby processed 285 cattle in his mobile USDA-approved abattoir in 2008.

direct quality control of his beef from birth to harvest.

“People today want to know where their beef comes from and how it was raised,” Schultz says.

He adds that those participating in developing the first USDA-approved mobile abattoir — a Herculean task involving six years and thousands of hours of work — were motivated by geographic necessity.

“San Juan County — a group of coastal islands between the U.S. Mainland and Canada — is geographically isolated,” Schultz says. “Our livestock producers had little or no access to USDA slaughtering facilities.”

### **More options for producers**

The USDA stamp on the carcass allows co-op members to sell their beef directly to local grocery stores, restaurants, mail order and via the Internet. Rather than having to transport cattle hundreds of miles to the nearest USDA-approved facility, animals can be harvested and processed right on the farm in a 24-ft. mobile livestock harvesting unit with a USDA inspector present.

The mobile unit is designed to accommodate cattle as well as sheep and hogs. The cost of membership is \$100, and livestock producers in a four-county area are invited to join. There is an \$85-per-animal harvest fee and a fee of 77¢ per pound (lb.) for cutting and wrapping.

Dunlop notes that it is a small price to pay when the value-added benefits are considered. It is not uncommon for a steer that sells at auction for \$700 liveweight to retail for \$2,500 to \$3,000 once it is cut, wrapped and ready for sale. That value is based on a hanging weight of around \$3.50 per pound.

He estimates that, after expenses, a livestock producer can double or triple his net.

### **Long-term process**

First conceived in 1996 by a group of San Juan Island livestock producers, the mobile abattoir was initially funded by a \$55,000 USDA grant for testing and development. Since then, co-op representatives have been involved, working directly with WSU Cooperative Extension, the USDA central and USDA regional offices, Washington’s Department of Agriculture and the Featherlite Trailer company of Iowa.

In order for the unit to be approved by USDA, the 24-ft. trailer had to be constructed in accordance with specifications and regulations for a meat-processing facility.

“We spent months with Featherlite working on the layout and specifications,” Dunlop recalls.

The all-stainless interior is comprised of two separate sections joined by a door. The general processing area, with a large door opening on to a ramp at the rear of the trailer, is where the butchering takes place. The smaller refrigeration unit is where the carcasses are hung for storage and transportation. The unit is licensed for up to 6,000 lb. of hanging weight.

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— Tom Schultz

### **The next generation**

Not long after work started on their unit, the Island Grown Farmers Co-op began receiving requests for information from other livestock producers across the country. It was then that Dunlop realized his community’s situation was not unique. For more than three decades, industry consolidation and attrition had forced thousands of USDA-approved,

locally owned packinghouses out of business.

“We soon learned that this wasn’t just our local problem; it was a problem across the nation,” he says. “There was and still is a real shortage of small- and medium-scale facilities to have animals processed.”

As of the writing of this article, Dunlop estimates that there are 10

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USDA-approved portable beef abattoirs operational in the United States. This includes one in Hawaii and another in Alaska. As a consultant, he has personally participated in the building of all but a couple of these portable facilities.

Dunlop notes that while the basic trailer design has remained relatively

the same during the last eight years, the newer ones tend to be longer — 36 ft. and up.

“This offers more space in the cooler to accommodate more animals,” he says. “The first unit could hold 10 beef carcasses, while the new basic model can handle 15.”

He adds that while the first unit was set up with a gooseneck hitch, all new mobile

facilities are designed to be pulled by a standard tractor-trailer.

While mobility and capacity are important factors to Dunlop’s clients, there is another that trumps them all, especially when his mobile units are compared with new permanent facilities.

“The biggest advantage to a mobile trailer is that it doesn’t cost a million dollars to set up,” he says. “If you want a

basic 36-ft. slaughter unit, we can have it for you in 12 weeks for \$184,000, not including the tractor.”

**Companion facility necessary**

For those who want to consistently produce volume, Dunlop also recommends having access to a temperature-controlled storage facility for aging the carcasses and a cut-and-wrap facility. Since 2001 The Island Co-op has leased the Peth Plant, a storage, cut-and-wrap facility in Bow, Wash. Centrally located between the counties, the mobile unit serves the USDA-inspected Peth plant — the name was retained from the family who owned and ran it into the early 1990s — acts as a home base for the co-op’s full-time butcher and manager.

On a typical day, the co-op’s butcher Jim Wieringa, takes the mobile unit to a co-op member’s farm where he harvests and dresses the animals. The hanging carcasses are then taken back to the Peth plant for aging, cutting and wrapping. Because both the mobile processing unit and the cutting and wrapping plant are USDA federally inspected, the co-op’s beef can be legally shipped to all 50 states.

Like the Lopez Island Co-op, Huesby also operates — in addition to his mobile unit — a USDA inspected cut-and-wrap facility. His establishment, located 15 minutes from his ranch in the nearby town of Walla Walla, doubles as a retail butcher shop. Its sizable meat locker provides the kind of storage space needed for the aging of carcasses processed by his mobile unit.

He notes that moving the carcasses to the permanent facility frees up his mobile unit to process more animals the next day or whenever it is needed.

For more information on mobile abattoirs, contact Huesby at <http://thunderingbooves.net> or Dunlop, [www.mobileslaughter.com](http://www.mobileslaughter.com).



For eight years members of the Island Grown Farmers Co-op of Lopez Island, Wash., have benefited from their USDA-approved mobile beef processing unit.