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News

The following article was posted on September 6th, 2011, in the Santa Maria Sun - Volume 12, Issue 27

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Fast(er) food

Central Coast ag group's mobile slaughterhouse fills demand for local and fresh meats
BY JEREMY THOMAS

At Rancho San Julian near Lompoc, and at other cattle ranches throughout the Central Coast, a new method for getting beef from the farm to the market is now a reality.

It's called a "mobile harvest unit," a 28-foot-long slaughterhouse trailer made entirely of aluminum, and it's been the dream of the Central Coast Agriculture Cooperative, a for-profit collective of ranchers from Santa Barbara, San Luis Obispo, and Monterey counties, for nearly a decade.

Elizabeth Poett, who runs Rancho San Julian along with her family, uses the mobile slaughterhouse at the ranch once a week. She said the unit has become vital to her business.

"It's very helpful for me because it has really no stress on the animal," she said. "I never have to travel with my animals. It's something that's just really important for the food system."

According to Coco Collelmo, a founding member of the co-op, the group is thrilled to have the unit back in business, as it allows ranchers to harvest their animals on their own land instead of hauling them as far as 150 miles for processing at a U.S. Department of Agriculture facility.

"The greatest achievement that we have right here, and one we're so tickled about, is that we are the first and the only USDA-certified Mobile Harvest Unit in the state of California," Collelmo said. "It's a big, big deal."

Collelmo should know. She not only runs the Fair Oaks Angus Ranch in Paso Robles, but nine years ago she helped pioneer the research grants necessary for construction of the trailer—at a cost of about \$150,000—with the help of 17th District Rep. Sam Farr (D-Carmel) and USDA Rural Development, an agency providing government loans to agricultural producers and cooperatives.

Monterey County rancher George Work is credited with the original idea. Work was searching for a way he could legally serve meat harvested from his ranch to his guests, and he heard about a similar mobile slaughterhouse being used in Washington state. He had the trailer built in 2002 and worked with Deb Garrison, coordinator of the Central Coast Ag Network, to navigate through the permitting process so ranchers involved in the co-op could legally use it.

The unit was first introduced locally by the Central Coast Ag Cooperative, an offshoot of the ag network, in 2009, and operated for six months before the co-op was forced to shut it down for financial reasons.

"We really had too advanced of a marketing plan," Collelmo said. "The real facts behind that are that we were not able to get a USDA inspector four days a week, and that's what our business plan called for. We could only get them one day a week. We just didn't have the capital to do that."

After suspending the program until the finances could be figured out, the trailer was commissioned for use by local ranchers again in early August.

The Central Coast Ag Cooperative, also known by its trade name "Coast Grown," now owns the unit and leases it out to J & R Meats, a cutting and wrapping facility based in Paso Robles. J & R, which helped conceive the idea, then schedules harvests to take place at pre-approved, USDA-certified ranches.

"If somebody wants a USDA kill at their ranch, it's necessary to find out how to put in a USDA-certified corral for harvest



Going mobile:

Small-scale ranchers say the Central Coast Ag Cooperative's new "Mobile Harvest Unit," a USDA-certified slaughterhouse trailer, allows for less stress on their animals and enables them to get their beef to local markets more easily. The trailer became operational in mid-August.

PHOTO COURTESY COCO COLLELMO

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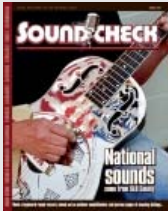
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purposes," Collelmo said. "If they would just like an animal slaughtered at home, it doesn't need to have a USDA inspector on board, which makes it very flexible."

The trailer is operated by three employees: a managing butcher, an assistant butcher, and a driver. It can handle about three tons of meat at each kill, and use of the unit costs ranchers \$238 per head of beef, and \$80 for each hog.

Besides saving time and money for ranchers, according to Coast Grown, the end result is a more humane harvesting practice, producing less stress on the animals and improving the quality of the meat. Even better, the organization says, the consumer doesn't have to guess where their meat comes from.

Looking like a surgical lab, the trailer's sleek interior is cleaned and sanitized daily. It's entirely self-contained, powered by a generator, and comes equipped with a chilling box for the animal carcasses. The carcasses are stored overnight, and are off-loaded at the fabricator the next day.

Once the meat gets to the fabricator, the carcasses hang for 14 to 21 days, then are cut and packaged. Coast Grown picks up the packaged meat and stores it at its facility in Oceano. From there, the co-op sells the meat directly to the public, online, or at farmers markets. The co-op projects about \$100,000 in annual revenue as a result.

The trailer is currently set up to handle beef, but will eventually be equipped to handle sheep and pigs. It's currently being used three days a week at ranches in Santa Barbara and SLO counties, primarily at Rancho San Julian and at the V6 ranch in Parkfield, two USDA-certified facilities belonging to the co-op.

Rancho San Julian's Poett said the mobile slaughterhouse affords ranchers like herself the ability to sell the meat they harvest in ways they never could've imagined.

"I had really wanted to sell directly to families, so to be able to do that I had to have [the meat] harvested USDA," she explained. "I took a look around, and here in California it's very limited. Big places would never take a small rancher like myself, or we just had to travel.

"This was just a really important project that has taken a lot of ranchers to get it working," she said.

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