



Ranch Foods Direct demonstrated the mobile meat processing unit last November at Venetucci Farm south of Colorado Springs. The unit received a grant of inspection from the U.S. Department of Agriculture on May 9. It will allow livestock to be processed right on the farm instead of being transported long distances.

Mobile Meat Processing Unit Achieves USDA Certification

ST. FRANCIS, KS.

Callicrate Cattle Co. will be authorized to process cattle within walking distance of where they were born and raised on the rolling plains of Northwest Kansas after receiving a grant of inspection recently from the U.S. Department of Agriculture.

A mobile meat processing unit parked near St. Francis, Kan., will be used for on-farm processing of beef, lambs, goats and pigs. Most of the meat will be marketed through the wholesale and retail outlets of Ranch Foods Direct in Colorado Springs.

The unit was on display last fall at Venetucci Farm during a live demonstration showing the public how it works and why it represents an improvement over large scale processing methods.

The most important aspect of on-farm processing is that it reduces stress on the livestock, which are routinely trucked hundreds of miles to large packing plants, according to Mike Callicrate, owner of Ranch Foods Direct and Callicrate Cattle Co.

"It stands to reason that less stress is better for the animal and for meat quality," Callicrate says. "Some research on bison has shown that shipping them as little as 25 miles can reduce meat tenderness and quality substantially."

The idea of creating a more locally based processing alternative to large meatpacking plants extends back at least two decades, according to Laura Krebsbach, a nonprofit consultant who headed up the project to build the mobile processing unit.

"We felt like we needed to find positive solutions to benefit the small sustainable livestock producers who are still left in this country," she says. "It just made sense for the Nebraska Environmental Action Coalition to take on this project and build a unit in the Midwest, the heart of farming and ranching country, where we felt like we could do it better and more affordably. I am grateful to Mike Callicrate, who became involved in testing and certifying the model, for sharing his dedication, support and financial contributions. He sees the big picture and shares our vision."

Mobile units cost less to build than brick-and-mortar facilities and are more flexible because they can be moved between locations.

"While the demand for locally and responsibly raised meat is increasing, small farmers and ranchers who are best suited to fill that need have been losing access to custom processors as the meat industry consolidates," Krebsbach says. "We wanted to design something that was within the financial reach of rancher groups, nonprofits, co-ops or cut-and-wrap meat facilities. When you consider the carbon footprint, the environmental impact and animal welfare issues, as well as giving the producer more control over his product and putting more money in his pocket, this approach just makes so much sense for so many reasons."

USDA approval was officially granted on May 9. USDA inspection allows the meat to be sold in wholesale and retail markets across the U.S. and internationally. Only a few mobile meat processing units have been certified nationwide.

Manufacturer Jerry Eisenmenger, who comes from a ranching family and now owns Flat River Corp. of Columbus, Neb., is busy building two more models, and the Nebraska Environmental Action Coalition is providing no-cost assistance to ranchers and Native American tribes who have expressed interest in the concept.

"Mobile meat processing can be an important component in rebuilding local and regional food systems, a primary objective of USDA's Know Your Farmer, Know Your Food campaign. Both Secretary Tom Vilsack and Deputy Secretary Kathleen Merrigan provided critical support in turning this project into a reality," Callicrate says.

"Secretary Vilsack helped usher us through this process," Krebsbach adds. "He deserves a lot of credit for being able to look down the road and see that we need to rebuild rural communities by bringing back the infrastructure for small producers."

The unit can process up to 15 to 20 cattle per day with a USDA meat inspector overseeing the processing of each animal. That compares to large plants where inspectors monitor fast-moving lines that process an animal every 8 to 9 seconds. More information about the mobile processing concept, including photos and videos, are available at www.MobileMeatProcessing.com. Or contact Mike Callicrate by calling 785-332-8218. △