

Processing meat difficult for local livestock farms

With closures of larger facilities in the midwest, Capital Region farmers struggle to find other viable options

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White dorper sheep at Two Rock Ranch in Berne. (Courtesy of Emily Vincent)

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Shannon Hayes' world is in turmoil. As a third-generation farmer, she is used to the unpredictable nature of running a farm and the uncertainty it can bring. But in the course of just a few months COVID-19 has created a situation that could completely destroy her livelihood.

Hayes' farm, Sap Bush Hollow Farm in West Fulton, Schoharie County, raises lamb, pork, beef and poultry and also has a farm store and cafe that serves products from the farm. She sells individual cuts of meat directly to customers from the store, but the closure of USDA meat processing facilities in the Midwest has forced out-of-state livestock into Capital Region slaughterhouses, and the result is a loss of processing slots of Sap Bush Hollow's livestock. Hayes says the problem not only impacts her livelihood but also means a less diverse food shed for people who support local farms.

The issue is complex, but a simplistic explanation can be broken into two situations. Processing (meaning the slaughter and butchering of livestock) can be done at USDA-inspected facilities or at state-inspected facilities. Farms that sell individual steaks, chops, roasts, bacon and sausages directly to the consumer must use USDA facilities. The sale of those cuts of meat are all completed after the livestock has been processed. (If you have ever bought a piece of meat from a grocery store, a farmers market or from most restaurants, the meat was processed at a USDA facility.)

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Farms that sell pre-purchased shares of an entire animal (half of a pig or a quarter of a cow, for example) can bypass the USDA facility and use New York state-certified processing centers, called a 20-C. There is less demand at state-inspected facilities, and farms with this business model collect their money from customers before the animal is processed.

Hayes said 90% of her farm's income is derived from the sale of individual cuts of meat. When COVID-19 forced the closure of large processing centers in the midwest, which can handle thousands of animals at a time, those animals were purchased by middlemen for pennies on the dollar and trucked to the northeast for slaughter. Hayes - who also speaks about this issue on her blog and podcast for the farm - said those middlemen could afford to pay a higher premium to entice local USDA processing facilities, negating existing processing slots for farms like hers. Slaughterhouses make higher profits, but vital revenue is lost for small local and there is a potential waste of animals. The customer also has less say in where they are able to purchase meat.

"It's not legal for me to sell you a steak unless it is killed under USDA inspection," Hayes said, and available processing slots are now as much as two years out. She estimates she sends batches of four to five hogs at a time (a total of around 30 per year) to local USDA processors but has recently witnessed trucks crammed with 40 or more hogs showing up for processing. For her, it's a heartbreaking and emotional sight. "We are in the business to be kind and see our animals through," she said, adding that the overload of animals to be processed also creates a loss of dignity in the work of butchers.

By forcing mass processing on butchers, they become unable to exercise the consistency and care of their craft and work long, grueling hours that can create an unsafe environment. Steve Ammerman, the public relations manager for New York Farm Bureau, said that his organization is supporting federal legislation that alleviates pressure on small processing facilities, ensuring the safety of butchers. "It is important to find the balance between adequate processing facilities for our farmers

while also ensuring public health and safety when it comes to inspection requirements and sales of meat products,” he said.

On the other side of the Schoharie Valley in Berne, Emily Vincent is experiencing the same issues at her sheep farm, Two Rock Ranch. “There are only a few processors in our area that take sheep,” Vincent said, and none of them are currently accepting sheep because of the influx of other livestock from out of state. Vincent said she has to make her arrangements for processing a year in advance and estimates she has 75 lambs processed each year into individual cuts that she sells at the Delmar farmers market. Because of COVID-19’s threat to the availability of meat in supermarkets, there is increased interest in buying her farm’s meat. “The response from customers this year has been really incredible. Because of COVID-19, people want to eat meat sourced close to home,” she said. Without a place to process her sheep, there is no way to capitalize on that interest. With less competition between farms and less availability for local meat, the price of meat is at risk of inflation or becomes subject to price gouging which can dramatically impact the eating habits and grocery bill for the consumer.

Vincent called the local supply chain “broken” and said this issue brings her perilously close to losing her farm and income. She worries for the livelihood of her farm and the farms surrounding Two Rock Ranch. “I don’t just support my farm, I support other farms around me,” through the purchase of hay and grain from neighboring farms, she said, and the loss of one farm has a domino effect on the local economy.

According to the USDA 2017 agriculture census, farms in New York state are responsible for 55,000 jobs, with an additional 150,000 jobs across the entire agricultural sector. Cattle is the fourth-leading product for New York agriculture, accounting for \$333 million of the state’s \$5.75 billion agriculture revenue. Vincent said if she cannot find a processor for her sheep, she will be forced out of farming.

Michael Lapi, visiting instructor at SUNY Cobleskill's meat lab program, said that the processing facility at the college where he teaches slaughter and butchering to students is a USDA facility and he is flooded with demand for processing from local farms. Without students on campus to work in the meat lab, he does not have the labor to handle the requests. He says the only tangible solution is for the federal government to allow state-inspected facilities to process individual cuts for retail sale. "We've got to think outside the box," he said, and the result would be greater access and affordability of locally sourced meat and more diversity of products on the meat market. He also feels it would increase safety for consumers, as most cases of foodborne illnesses from meat come from factory farms and the enormous USDA facilities that process those animals.

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Congress introduced a bill last year called the Prime Act, which would allow for the slaughter and processing of animals at state-inspected facilities using USDA guidelines. U.S. Rep. Elise Stefanik is a co-sponsor of the bill. An emailed statement from New York state Department of Agriculture and Markets said that state-certified slaughterhouses can apply for a 90-day USDA waiver to fulfill individual-cut processing, but Vincent said she has not heard of this program nor has she received any news from local slaughterhouses that this is available.

Hayes said the life cycle and processing timeframe for her livestock is based on seasonality, and a lack of processors means she needs to find shelter and feed for her livestock over the winter. Sap Bush Hollow Farm is a grass-fed farm and cannot rely on grain to feed livestock. Animals fed only hay over the winter will lose fat marbling, which takes months to rebuild, and does not comply with Sap Bush Hollow's standards. The extended age of the animals means less tender meat and loss of certain highly profitable cuts because of increased testing for parasites and disease as an animal ages.

The only options for Hayes' farm to survive, she said, are to function illegally, waste animals or convince people to buy whole animals. (One problem here is the lack of freezers for storing meat, as multiple appliance dealers have reported continuous sell outs of stand-alone freezers for home use since the start of the pandemic.) If she doesn't find a work-around for this debilitating processing issue, "I lose my year's income and continue incurring massive expenses." She is working on a contingency plan, which includes more education for customers and advocating for legislative reform, but she knows there is great potential for her farm and others like it to vanish within a year.