

# Local Beef At The Crossroads

By MARK WINNE

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I have two 15-year-old farm hats in my possession. Faded and sweat-stained, they still bear the John Deere tractor insignia and the name of the dealership in Bantam where I once bought a tractor. Now, all that remains of that dealership are those two hats. As Connecticut's farm economy began to shrink, the John Deere dealer was forced to close, perhaps taking the honorable position that it wouldn't cater to the sit-down lawn mower crowd that was now cutting grass on land that once grew crops.

In a place where the agricultural infrastructure was already contracting - fewer large animal veterinarians, fewer tree pruning companies, fewer feed stores - the loss of a farm equipment suppliers was one more blow to Connecticut's fragile farm network. And if some imaginative solutions aren't found soon, another key piece of farm infrastructure - the region's livestock slaughter and meat processing facilities - may go down the same road as its former tractor dealers.

Back in March, White Flower Farm owner and livestock enthusiast Eliot Wadsworth convened a meeting in Litchfield to examine the decline in slaughter and processing facilities across southern New England and eastern New York. A facility in Athol, Mass., had recently burned down. Another one in Stafford Springs had gone through several owners and was now only doing limited business in Halal (for the Muslim market) and kosher meats.

Bristol Beef, Connecticut's only full-service USDA-inspected slaughter facility, was operating only two days a week, its aging owner not wanting to take on more business. A few small operations in the region were so overburdened by demand that farmers were forced to schedule their animals for slaughter a year in advance.

More than 300 people attended that night, the most that anyone can remember seeing at a farm-related meeting in a long time. Wadsworth attributed this overwhelming turnout to two factors: "Available space for slaughtering, cutting and wrapping meat has been declining for years in New England at the same time that the demand for locally produced food is skyrocketing. With 42 million consumers living within 250 miles of us, we've got a heck of a market opportunity."

Indeed, as the expansion of Connecticut's farmers markets, now at more than 90 locations, attests, the demand for local, non-factory-raised food is rocketing. Hungry "locavores" want to buy a juicy rib-eye from a local farmer as much as they want sweet corn and tomatoes.

Wadsworth and fellow Litchfield livestock farmer John Morosani keep adding more Black Angus to their herds to keep pace with demand. But without a resolution to the slaughter/processing dilemma, expansion in livestock production will come to a grinding halt.

"Any growth in the number of cows now would swamp current slaughter capacity," Morosani told me. "And if we can't do something productive with this land, like grazing cattle on it, what's the point of preserving farmland?"

A survey taken at the March meeting bore out Morosani's conclusions. Virtually every one of the producers in attendance indicated that they would increase the size of their herds "if meat processing was easier, cheaper, more convenient and more reliable."

One idea that's getting traction is a mobile slaughter unit. Essentially an abattoir on wheels, the unit can move from farm to farm, where it slaughters the animals and deposits waste into an on-farm composting site. The carcasses are hung in the temperature-controlled, USDA-inspected

unit, which then transports them to a cut and wrap facility - essentially a large butcher shop - that processes them into steaks, hamburger and roasts. The "MSU" can visit several farms over the course of a week and has a range of 100 miles or more. It has one other very nice feature: It costs about \$200,000 compared with a minimum \$2 million investment for a fixed-site plant.

One of the few large-scale butcher shops still in operation is Litchfield Locker, situated just a quarter-mile from the town's green. Owned and operated by Rob Thompson and Jeff Foglia, the term "locker" goes back to pre-supermarket days when families would keep their annual meat supply in a central community freezer. Although that service has gone the way of the wheelwright, the surge in demand for custom local meats suggests a vital new role for places such as Litchfield Locker.

Both Thompson and Foglia think their business would be a suitable home for a mobile slaughter unit, which needs to be tethered to a central operation point that will receive and process the carcasses. "I think a mobile unit," said Foglia, "would help grow the market for local beef and give producers a greater sense of security."

There are many hills to climb before a MSU comes to a farm near you. There are regulators to negotiate with, some with competing and confusing rules; funding must be raised; and a slew of operational details must be worked out. Clearly the state's once-moribund livestock industry has a glimmer of hope sparked by a healthy appetite for all things local. But unless you want to pick up that 1,200-pound steer at the farm and do the deed yourself in your garage, someone will have to unplug the slaughter and processing bottleneck.

And of course there are more than local steaks at stake. Standing on a ridge looking west across Morosani's 700-acre farm, one sees swelling waves of hills receding along a palette of warm green and cool blue tones. There are no McMansions dotting the ridgelines, only pastures, woodlands and small herds of Black Angus hoovering up the lush grass. Conserving this landscape means keeping it productive. Keeping it productive means rebuilding Connecticut's agricultural infrastructure. I'll tip my John Deere cap to that.

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