

Small-scale slaughterhouses put local back in 'local meat'

By Beth Hoffman, NPR

It's hard to go a day without hearing people brag about how they eat local. In-the-know consumers wax poetic about their local farmers' markets, and some even make pilgrimages to meet their rancher, visit cows grazing and see pigs playing happily in the mud.

But the dirty little secret is, while that steak those "locavores" just bought at the farmers' market may have come from a cow that grazed in nearby pastures, it probably wasn't processed anywhere nearby. In fact, many local meat products are sent to slaughterhouses hundreds of miles away, across state lines.

So some small-scale cattle producers are taking matters into their own hands in an effort to keep money, jobs and something "local" on dinner plates.

In Washington state for example, most grass-fed beef raised on the eastern plains journeys some 400 to 600 miles to Oregon or Idaho for processing before arriving back in Seattle. That means not only a larger carbon footprint for each hamburger served, but processing animals out of state also sucks money out of the state's rural communities and makes locally produced beef more expensive.

So the Cattle Producers of Washington (CpoW), like several other innovative groups around the country, are breaking ground this summer on a new slaughterhouse in Odessa (Lincoln County) that will cater exclusively to small eastern Washington ranches.

“We don’t want to be the next Tyson or Cargill, processing large numbers of animals for national distribution,” says Willard Wolf, President of CPoW. “We are not interested in competing on that level. The whole idea is to have quality control and humane processing for local cattle, hogs, sheep and goats that provides consumers in the state with [the] locally produced products they are demanding. Having a producer-owned plan will help keep dollars, ranchers and farmers in our communities.”

Forty years ago, when Wolf started working as a rancher in Eastern Oregon, there were seven slaughterhouses in the region able to process and package meat from small scale producers. Today there are none.

Read the whole story