Building a Mobile Slaughter Facility, Part 2
By Slow Food USA, Quotes Holly Freishtat
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Last week we began exploring the question of mobile slaughter units, and their ability to provide infrastructure to small and mid-sized meat producers. Examining the history of the first ever facility in the country, we hope to answer the question: is this replicable?

What does it take to be the first at something like this? To give a little history about how the mobile slaughter unit project on Lopez Island started: in 1997 a group of farmers approached the Lopez Community Land Trust to explore the feasibility of having a USDA mobile slaughter unit for San Juan County (Lopez, orcas, San Juan and Shaw Islands).

Thomas Forster, the Executive Director at the time, received several grants to conduct needs assessment. As a result, Holly Freishtat was hired as the Community Food Systems Coordinator. As part of the needs assessment, she surveyed the farmers in the county, organized focus groups to determine the demand for local foods and examined the USDA regulations for meat inspection to find an exemption to become first USDA inspected mobile slaughter facility in the country.

11 years later, Holly, now a Sustainable Food Specialist and a Food and Society Policy Fellow, explained to us what that process looked like, and what questions she needed to ask. When speaking with Holly, we asked her what she learned as a result of this assessment and she said that “the issues this island community is facing, of farmers not having access to local infrastructure, and consumers not having access to the local foods they demand, is no different from what rural and urban communities are facing around the country. I thought they were unique because they were surrounded by water and now I have realized...
that it is a result of a centralized global food system. We have to build the capacity and infrastructure for our farmers and consumers to have local foods.”

The idea of the mobile facility, she explained, was to provide a USDA inspected meat that could be sold in supermarkets and in the restaurants, to keep ranching alive on the island and to bring in new, young farmers (combating the aging farmer problem seen all around the country). This process took many years because there were many hurdles to get over, both logistically and financially. How to convince the USDA that it should have an inspector devoted solely to this unit? How to raise the funds to build it? And, looking forward, what would be needed in order for this to be replicated in other communities?

Amazingly, all of the hurdles were cleared and the unit began operating in 2003 and serves four counties. It is owned by the Lopez Community Land Trust and was built with money raised through private sources and also with some government funding. It is operated by a farmers cooperative which also operates a fixed building for fabricating (for the cutting, packaging, and aging of beef). All meat remains the property of the farmer, and it is the farmer’s responsibility to take on the task of selling it. They sell to individuals, butcher shops and restaurants, and the unit has — so far — proven to accomplish exactly what Holly Freishtat had hoped it would do when she did her investigations all those years back. Farmers on the island are making a living raising meat, and people who live on Lopez are enjoying fresh, delicious, sustainable, grass-fed product.

After the needs assessment was completed, Bruce Dunlop was hired as the project manager. Bruce is the manager of the unit, and has now become an expert on mobile slaughter facilities. Since getting the Lopez unit up and running, he has helped to build six others, including one in California and one in South Dakota. One of Freishtat’s questions had been: can this be replicated in other communities, and so far, the answer seems to be yes, setting an exciting precedent.