

“Mobile Processing Unit a Boon for Small Ruminants,” *Stockman Grass Farmer*,  
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by Christine E. Black

Farmer Raymond Farber learned the value of self-sufficiency from his father, who lived as a child on his grandmother’s orchard in East Germany during Hitler’s rise to power.

“One day Hitler said, ‘You have no more money,’ and the family had to figure out how to survive on the orchard with fruit trees and a garden,” Faber said. His father escaped Nazi Germany at 13 years old. He taught the importance of farming and survival.

With many people worried now about food supplies along with a current backlog in processing at butcher shops, Raymond Faber and his wife, Rachael, wanted to learn to process their animals themselves for their family and for their local farmers’ market customers. They are among the first enrollees in a new course, Virginia State University’s Small Ruminant Mobile Processing Unit (MPU) Certification Program. Brand new to the state, the mobile unit will allow farmers to process their animals on their own farms or at neighboring farms.

The program teaches farmers and participants how to use the unit. It offers five instructional modules in the unit’s design and usage; sheep and goat harvesting and carcass fabrication; state and federal regulations; product marketing; and operating the MPU. Instruction includes assignments and quizzes plus a two-day hands-on module in which participants learn to set up and break down the mobile unit and learn butchering and fabrication. The course ends with participants earning a certification to use the mobile unit to process their livestock. Federal and state inspection services are included.

The cost is 100 dollars to lease the unit for four days with up to 30 animals slaughtered and processed during this time plus a 15 dollar per head unit maintenance fee. All equipment for slaughtering and processing is included along with packaging. When a certified producer leases the unit, Extension Agent and Unit Coordinator Wallace Brousseau drives to the farm with the trailer and helps with set up and break down. He will also be there during slaughtering and processing and to complete all paperwork and logs.

Processed meat may be done custom (not for sale/ home consumption only) or under state or federal inspection (able to sell meat at farmer’s markets, retail, and across state lines). At no additional cost, Brousseau will arrange to have an inspector present on site if inspected meat is desired. Services will also include completing Hazard Analysis Critical Control Point (HACCP) paperwork.

“All butchers within a five-hour radius were booked,” the Fabers said. “And were not taking appointments until next year.” Raymond and Rachael Faber raise about 80 sheep, broiler and layer chickens, ducks, and some cows on their farm in Glade Spring, Virginia. The local Greek restaurant buys all their lamb, and their local farmer’s market customers keep asking for their lamb as well. They said the VSU course was empowering and comprehensive.

“It was very gratifying to see the process of moving from the animal to food,” Rachael said, adding that she recommends farmers enroll in the course, planning to do it as a team. “Because when it comes to butcher time, it’s a lot of work, and only people who have received the training and certification can use the unit.”

The mobile unit is the brainchild of Virginia State University (VSU) Small Ruminant Specialist Dr. Dahlia O’Brien; Dr. Stephen Wildeus, Research Scientist from VSU and Agricultural Research Station; and Wallace Brousseau, Unit Coordinator for VSU and Virginia Cooperative Extension. Funded by the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA), the unit’s design was completed in 2016 in cooperation with Delaware State University and Virginia Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services (VDACS).

The 40-foot all-aluminum gooseneck trailer has an 8’6” interior ceiling height and is 8’6” wide and has a roof structure sufficient to support an overhead rail system. All surfaces are washable with sealed seams, and a floor sloped to drains. The unit has a rear ramp door and a winch for rear door operation and to move loads up the ramp to the rail system.

With insulated walls, floors, and ceiling, the unit includes two sinks with hot and cold water -- one which is a hand washing station and the other a three-bay sink. It has a 100-gallon water holding tank and electrical outlets suitable for use in wet environments. It has a built-in 8-foot deep walk-in cooler. The final cost was 138,139 dollars, according to Virginia Cooperative Extension researchers.

Supplies and equipment procured in 2019-2020 include stainless steel tables; digital scale head; knives, hard hats, butcher aprons, gloves; gambrels and hooks; cutting boards; meat totes with covers; first aid kits; table top scale; vacuum sealer; meat saw; and meat grinder.

The program is very accessible, the Fabers said.

“You each have an animal that you do by yourself with waterproof aprons,” Raymond Faber said. “You use a stun gun for the hands-on part. And then roll the animal into the refrigerator overnight, and then the next day, pull it out of the refrigerator to work on it.” Instructors teach participants how to butcher the animal, depending on what kinds of cuts they want.

“Wally knows what customers want,” Raymond Faber said about Extension Associate and MPU Instructor Wallace Brousseau. “It was amazing to learn about tucking in cuts. The final products look very professional.”

“We are just so grateful to have their help,” said Rachael Faber. She adds the couple feels confident now to use the unit successfully.

One of the main goals of the project is to use the MPU to increase the profitability of Virginia’s small sheep and goat farmers. Researchers plan to develop a coordinated multi-farmer slaughter and food hub market distribution model for potential use of the MPU by Virginia small ruminant producers and food hubs.

“We are hoping for the unit to be used at four to five main hubs in Virginia, farms where people can go,” Brousseau said. “And the Faber’s farm should be ready in January.” MPU set-up

locations must have potable water hook ups, electrical hook-up and diesel; composting and mortality facilities; and an area or field for land application of wastewater.

“We are looking for producers to serve as butchers in their communities,” said Dahlia O’Brien. “Folks are very excited about that possibility.” Many producers see the marketing potential of having their animals both raised and processed on the farm, she added.

“A lot of producers are holding back because of the inspection issues,” Brousseau said. “When we begin offering inspections, and people are putting their products in farmers’ markets, we think this is going to be very successful.”

“And we will help them, hold their hand with regulations and paperwork,” O’Brien added.

Rachael and Raymond Faber said they look forward to providing food for friends, family, and customers with skills they have gained.

“People want to trust where their food comes from,” Rachael Faber said. “We think this program is going to be a life-saver.”