

Telkwa producers step up to provide slaughter services

But complex approval process remains a source of frustration

KATE AYERS

TELKWA – The recent closure of the only local slaughter facility in the Regional District of Bulkley-Nechako has forced local producers to take matters into their own hands.

“If I’m entirely honest, this is not something that we really wanted to be doing at this point in our lives,” says Paul Murphy, who with Marlene Thimer runs Happy Pig Organic Farm in Telkwa. “But when we don’t have any other options and we want to continue raising poultry, this is really the only way that we could see to make it work.”

The family have raised pigs, cattle, sheep, broilers, layers and turkeys since 2008. Starting as a hobby operation, Happy Pig Organic Farm has evolved into a commercial operation that supplies meat products to the local community.

But in March, Bulkley Valley Custom Slaughter in Telkwa closed with little advance warning to growers.

“We had 300 chicks that were a week old when we found out that [Bulkley Valley Custom Slaughter] wasn’t opening this year,” Murphy says.

While local ranchers Joyce and Rene Dieleman and their children took over the existing facility to process red meat under the name DJ Meat Locker, poultry isn’t yet on the menu.

The closest poultry processor is a three-hour drive away, but it was – and remains – fully booked.

“We borrowed slaughter equipment and we processed them ourselves,” Murphy says. “We didn’t have a licence, so I can’t sell them. I have 300 very large meat birds in my freezer that I guess we’re going to be eating for five years to come because there was no way to get a licence and nowhere to get them processed.”

Murphy isn’t alone. “In this area, there’s lots and lots of small farmers, hobby farmers. And they depend on the local abattoir,” says Joyce Dieleman. “I’m talking like beef, sheep, hogs, goats, all of it. And it’s important for them to have their product processed locally in order for them to survive. You can’t be shipping

your animals off to Vanderhoof, Prince George, because you’re not going to be making any money. The profit will be [tied] up in transport.”

Murphy and Thimer are in the process of applying for a Farmgate Plus licence, which allows producers to process 25,000 pounds of liveweight animals, or approximately 3,500 meat birds.

But there’s a catch – within the Agricultural Land Reserve,

Too many levels ▶



When the local abattoir shut down earlier this year, Marlene Thimer and her partner Paul Murphy had to process their own meat birds and start the lengthy application process for a slaughter licence. | SUBMITTED

ACCESS TO FEED

AVAILABLE TO ALL LIVESTOCK PRODUCERS



This program is intended to link producers experiencing drought and feed shortages with suppliers who have feed available.

We will need:

- Type of hay and quality
- Bale type & size
- Equipment to unload
- Ability to handle a b-train or step-deck delivery
- Your contact information & location

PROGRAM CONTACT:

Email: hay@cattlemen.bc.ca

Call or text: 250.306.6277





REACH OUT TO US IF YOU HAVE FEED AVAILABLE

▶ Too many levels of government involved in application process: abattoirs

the limit is just 10,000 pounds.

"If someone's going to make an investment to process birds, unless you do a lot of birds yourself, you need to process birds for other people to pay for your equipment," Murphy says. "If you're restricted to 10,000 pounds a year, that's nothing. We would eat up most of that just with our production."

While the long-term plan is to upgrade to an abattoir licence, Murphy and Thimer currently have their hands full navigating the Farmgate Plus licence labyrinth.

Properly filling out applications for multiple ministries is the first hurdle. Even as a former forestry consultant who has experience with provincial agencies and bureaucracy, Murphy has found the process arduous. For example, the Regional District of Bulkley-Nechako needs to approve the non-farm use of the land, the Agricultural Land Commission needs to approve non-farm use rezoning for the facility, the BC Ministry of Transportation and Infrastructure must permit commercial use of their 30-year-old access road, Northern Health must issue a Food Premises Permit and the BC Ministry of Agriculture and Food must approve the processing facility after construction.

"I'm not asking for them to hold my hand, but ... it's a little bit like an onion," Murphy says. "If you read on their website, it seems very straightforward, but as you dive into it, every time you take a layer off, it's like

Dieleman family feels feed, labour crunch

While the spring and summer are slower seasons for abattoirs, the Dieleman family has felt the impacts of feed and labour force shortages since acquiring the abattoir formerly operated as Bulkley Valley Custom Slaughter.

"April, May, June and the beginning of July are pretty slow times," says Joyce Dieleman of Dieleman Ranch and DJ Meat Locker in Telkwa. "Everybody's turned their animals on grass and with a shortage of feed from last year with the drought and everything, a lot of people sold their products off in the fall."

As a result, the abattoir is open for processing two days a week, but the family will increase availability as the need arises.

An abattoir wasn't part of the long-term plan for the ranch, but family members have stepped up to provide this essential service to the community. Joyce and her son Nathan worked at the former Bulkley Valley Custom Slaughter for three years and now her daughter Chelsea Jaarsma along with Chelsea's husband Eric have come on board. The five family members have formed a partnership to assume abattoir duties.

But even with family support, the Dielemans could use a few extra hands during the busy season. Running both a ranch and an abattoir is no easy feat.

"Starting businesses and operating an abattoir specifically is challenging. But our biggest challenge is the labour force. We're having problems finding employees," Dieleman says. "And that's pretty much everywhere. This is kind of a little specialty thing, and a lot of people can't do it. We're definitely looking for employees all the time."

—Kate Ayers

"oh, there's more stuff I have to do, and oh I have to do this and oh I have to do that."

The application process could be more streamlined with one contact person who could communicate with each of the required parties on the applicant's behalf, Murphy says.

"All these ministries, all these

people, agencies, they develop these application forms, and these people know their field of expertise inside and out. So, when they make an application, it's from the perspective of someone that really knows what they're talking about," Murphy says. "Basically, you have the farmer or the applicant going through these

applications and just scratching their heads wondering why the hell they're asking this information or what pertinence does this have to the situation."

But perhaps the most concerning and worrisome part of the whole application process is the upfront cost required without a guarantee that approval will follow.

Murphy sent his facility design to the BC Ministry of Agriculture and Food for feedback, but they won't look at it until construction is complete.

"They won't do it," he says. "Basically, [it's] go ahead and spend your \$100,000 or \$150,000 on your processing facility and then we'll come and inspect it and tell you what's wrong with it, and then you can fix it and then maybe we'll grant you your licence."

Murphy has already paid nearly \$3,000 in application fees to the regional district and ALC.

Small-Scale Meat Producers Association executive director Julia Smith says the association has helped many of its members secure funding, but acknowledges that the approvals process is tough to navigate.

There's no set timeline for licence approvals that would give producers clarity around what to expect. The province was unable to provide its average approval time prior to deadline.

Murphy hopes to receive his Farmgate Plus licence by August – but that's assuming no further obstacles after three months of challenges.



PRAIRIECOAST
equipment

1.877.553.3373 WWW.PCE.CA

DEEREDAYS

GET UP TO
0% FOR 72 MONTHS
ON ALL COMPACT UTILITY TRACTORS

VISIT US ONLINE AT
WWW.PCE.CA
OR SCAN THE QR
CODE TO SEE ALL
OUR SPECIALS:

*Offer valid with 20% of purchase price down. Loaders are factory installed. Items may not be exactly as shown, accessories, attachments, and implements cost extra. taxes, set-up, delivery charges not included. A documentation fee of up to \$349. Programs and prices subject to change without notice. See PrairieCoast equipment for full details. Some restrictions apply. Offer valid until July 31, 2024 while supplies last. Financing on approved John Deere Financial credit only. Limited time offer which may not be combined with other offers. QID#30819116 1025R w/loader. QID#30819678 1025R loader/back.

Nanaimo | Chilliwack | Langley | Kamloops | Kelowna | Prince George