



Mateusz Perkowski/Capital Press

Shannon Hughes, manager of the Custom Meat Co. in Eugene, Ore., speaks about the company's closure on June 17. Oregon slaughter facilities are under pressure as owners retire or die and replacements are hard to find.

# Slaughter facilities face challenges

Slaughter, processing skills tough to replace, expert says

By MATEUSZ PERKOWSKI  
Capital Press

After roughly four decades in operation, the Custom Meat Co. of Eugene, Ore., shut down on June 17.

While employees and clients still hope the mobile custom slaughter and meat processing company will be bought and re-opened, they acknowledge the business fell into disarray after owner Victor Hastings succumbed to cancer in January.

Hastings didn't leave a will and key licenses for the facility lapsed, contributing to its closure, said Shannon Hughes, the company's manager.

Unless an investor takes over the company, Keith Cooper, who raises hogs at nearby Sweetbriar Farms, is worried about traveling much greater distances to process carcasses.

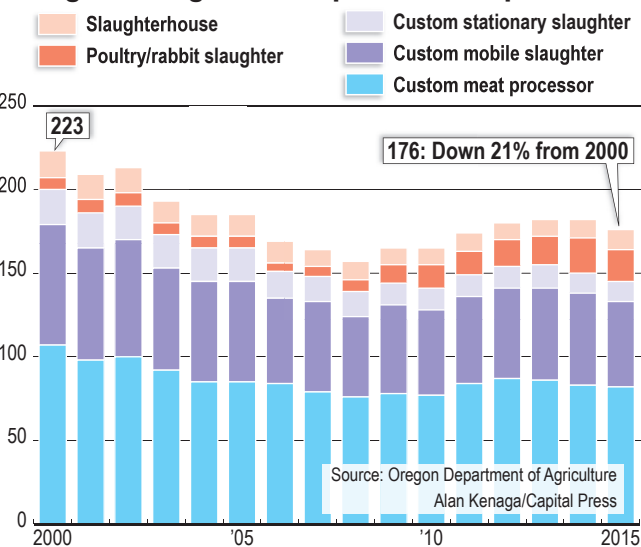
The facility and its workers were instrumental in helping Cooper prepare meat for his customers, often when time was in short supply.

"I probably couldn't have existed or grown my business to the extent I had without the assistance of Custom Meat or Vic Hastings," he said.

The problems encountered by the Custom Meat Co. provide an example of the pressures faced by Oregon's slaughter and meat processing facilities.

As the owners of such companies retire or die, finding replacements is difficult — both because their skills are rare and because fewer people are willing to do such work, said Lauren Gwin, an Oregon State University professor and director of the Niche Meat Processor Assistance Network.

## Oregon slaughter and processor operations



"It is a brutal job to go out and kill things all day long," Gwin said. "It's not the kind of thing younger people are interested in doing."

Since 2000, the number of mobile and stationary custom slaughter facilities in Oregon has dropped more than 30 percent, from 93 to 63, according to data from the Oregon Department of Agriculture. Such operations kill animals for their owners, rather than for meat resale.

In that 15 years, the number of USDA-inspected slaughterhouses — which can process livestock for the wholesale meat market — has fallen 25 percent, from 16 to 12.

Apart from the physical hardship of killing, bleeding out and skinning livestock, the job is often financially challenging as well, said Gwin.

An owner of a mobile slaughter truck, for example, must pay for its fuel and upkeep as well as disposing of offal and maintaining the appropriate licenses, she said.

Changes in the overall beef industry have also affected slaughter facilities, said Jerry Haun, owner of Haun's Meat

and Sausage and executive secretary of the Northwest Meat Processors Association.

Cow-calf producers often prefer to sell cattle in large lots instead of selling individual animals at auction to local landowners, he said. With fewer locals raising beef, the demand for local slaughter facilities decreased as well.

As the price of cattle has weakened recently, though, more cow-calf producers are again willing to sell "oddball calves" to backyard farmers, Haun said.

Interest in organic, grass-fed and farm-to-table beef also indicates that the local slaughter industry will remain viable, he said. "They're not just catch-words, it's reality. It's something we've been doing for decades but it's now the hip thing."

Not all types of meat facilities in Oregon are on the decline.

The number of custom meat processors that don't kill animals but cut up carcasses has stabilized at above 80 operations in recent years, though it's still down from roughly 100 operations in the early 2000s, according to ODA data.

# Rain takes a bite out of cherry crop

By DAN WHEAT  
Capital Press

WENATCHEE, Wash. — A light but stellar Washington cherry crop has been damaged by heavy rain, and while some fruit was ruined overall industry losses may not be as large as first thought.

What previously was estimated as a crop of 18.3 million, 20-pound boxes now is probably a 17-million-box crop, said B.J. Thurlby, president of Northwest Cherry Growers, the industry promotional organization.

A total of 7.3 million boxes had been shipped from the start of the season, May 18, through June 20. Virtually all were picked before the June 18 rain, Thurlby said.

"It wasn't a horrible rain storm. It could have been worse. It stayed cool and the wind blew," he said.

Wind helps dry cherries and cool weather afterward reduces crop-ruining cracking.

Two weeks of cool weather before the rain is pushing the production peak of 500,000-plus boxes per day out to the Fourth of July, he said.

The Fourth is a traditional marketing target, and there still will be plenty of fruit for promotions and ad-prices remaining in place, Thurlby said.

Heavy rain struck throughout Central Washington from Oregon to Canada. Picking mostly ceased through Monday as growers and packers analyzed how much fruit could be salvaged.

"Cracks in the stembel are legal to pack if they are small and heal," said Norm



Dan Wheat/Capital Press

Andy Handley shows stembel cracking, ruining his Sweetheart cherries in East Wenatchee, Wash., on June 20. Heavy rain June 18 split a lot of cherries in Central Washington.

Gutzwiler, a Wenatchee grower.

"If prices are right, it can be sorted and make money for the grower. If not, they go to the processor (for bringing) or you leave them on the tree," Gutzwiler said.

It's a matter of economics when it comes to high-tech packing house sorting and if prices are too low growers shouldn't be picking, he said.

"Frankly, prices will have to go higher than they are," Gutzwiler said, adding production and marketing will be in limbo a few days.

Gutzwiler, Thurlby and others said fruit size and quality had been exceptional until the rain.

Damage ranges up to 45 percent but will clean up in a week and later fruit will mature with no damage, said Roger Pepperl, marketing director at Stemilt Growers LLC in Wenatchee, the nation's largest sweet cherry producer.

"We are extremely optimistic with good fruit size, lots of Skeena (variety) coming on with great flavor

and good demand," Pepperl said.

Fourth of July cherries will be "awesome" and Stemilt will offer a special Kyle's Pick brand, named for Stemilt co-owner Kyle Mathison, with high sugars and firmness and large size, he said.

Thurlby said two large Skeena growers in the Basin lost 20 percent. Skeena, a Canadian variety, is more susceptible to cracking. Wenatchee's Stemilt Hill orchards sustained up to 40 percent damage and a larger grower in the Okanogan about 5 percent, he said.

Rain was less in The Dalles, Ore., said Brenda Thomas, president of Orchard View Farms Inc., Oregon's largest cherry grower. Damage is manageable with the company's new high-tech cherry sorter a huge help, she said.

Normal 10 percent cullage has risen to 20 to 30 percent, she said. The crop is later than Washington's with about two-thirds to go, she said.

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