

What will happen to our cattle

by Jacoba Charles

The Rancho slaughterhouse stands on a low hill just north of downtown Petaluma. An aging collection of buildings and corals, it has served local cattle ranchers and dairy farmers for almost a century. Rancho Veal, the business that owns the slaughterhouse, is now expected to close in what would be yet another blow to an already embattled ranching community.

Although ranching has declined in Marin, the infrastructure that remains is vital for preserving what is left. Marin has lost 32,000 acres of agricultural lands in the last 50 years, and the number of ranches has dwindled from 1,800 to 276 in roughly the same period, according to the UC Cooperative Extension (UCCE). However, interest in alternative agriculture – including locally grown, grass-fed, and organic meats – is expanding rapidly.

Rancho

Petaluma grew up around the slaughterhouse, which opened its doors 90 years ago. The current owners purchased it in 1966, when the meat market was booming. As the profitability of ranching has declined, so have the profits of the slaughterhouse, and the owner, Bob Singleton, is now ready to retire. The property that it occupies is no longer on the outskirts of town – instead, it's prime real estate, one mile south of the upscale Cinnabar Theater. Legačy Partners, a housing developer, optioned the 3.46-acre property last year.

The project is on hold pending approval by the City of Petaluma of a request for re-zoning and subdivision. If it goes through, the slaughterhouse will be demolished and the land will become part of a nearly 12-acre development consisting of 79 buildings. There are 48 single-family units, 18 fourplex units and 13 live work units planned. The change signifies an endemic

shift in land-use patterns for the entire area.

"It's all vineyards and homes here now," said Singleton. Business has declined along with the number and size of ranching operations in coastal California. Singleton said they now process only about 300 cows each week, less than half of what they used to. The business is now open four days a week instead of five, and is operated by a smaller crew. Approximately one third of the cattle brought to Rancho come from neighboring counties, Singleton said; two thirds are brought in from out-of-state.

Singleton emphasized there is no certainty that the project will be approved or that the slaughterhouse will shut down. But most people are expecting Rancho to close. "The issue is not if, but when," said Ellie Rilla, the Marin County Farm Advisor for UCCE.

Ranching in Marin

Livestock and livestock products contribute well over half of the agricultural revenue in Marin County. According to a UCCE survey in 2003, only 2 percent of the 186 agricultural producers in Marin were considering leaving the business, but 63 percent were unprofitable or marginally profitable.

Local ranchers are increasingly caught between the rising cost of grain and price competition with large-scale producers. As feedlots, slaughterhouses, distributors and retailers each claim a piece of the profits and the price of conventionally grown meat stays the same, ranchers wind up paying the price.

Most beef cattle that are raised in Marin County are sold as calves to feedlots in the Central Valley or to other western states. Dairy farmers depend on Rancho to buy their non-productive cattle, which are usually replaced at around 30 percent per year, for reasons that range from poor milk production to bad feet.



if the slaughterhouse is gone?

"Having a facility like Rancho has been very important to the dairy and beef industry," said Albert Straus of the Straus Family Creamery. "If they go further away, the transportation would be taken off of any price that we would get for those animals."

Cattle ranchers such as Drakes Bay Family Farms or Marin Sun Farms, which are raising local meat to serve a local community, will be hurt the most by the closure. David Evans of Marin Sun Farms said that it is very important to his locally-grown, grass-fed business that to have a processing facility nearby.

"This will be most devastating to anyone who is trying to get out of the commodity beef market and do more grass-fed, direct marketing, or community supported agriculture," said Rilla. Though only a few local ranches are currently exploring those specialty markets, consumer demand for them is making them more profitable. Last year, The UCCE went to every ranch in Marin and surveyed them about their interest in pursuing those specialty markets. Over half of them said that they are.

What next?

An organization called North Coast Meats has formed since the potential closure of Rancho Veal was announced. The group, spearheaded by Sam Goldberger and Phyllis Faber, one of the founders of the Marin Agricultural Land Trust, aims not only to preserve existing infrastructure but also to foster the possibilities for livestock growers and meat providers in the local sustainable agriculture movement.

"The task is to create a regional agricultural infrastructure, but not necessarily to recreate what was here before," said Goldberger. "Right now, food travels on the order of thousands of miles before it reaches you and consumers are demanding for that to change."

The group is currently doing a feasibility study examining the costs of building and operating an organic, USDA-approved "Integrated Animal Processing Center" that would serve a wider variety of functions than traditional slaughterhouses do – such as including a cut-and-wrap facility for the meat and direct distribution of the meats to retailers. They also plan to house a commercial kitchen, provide profit sharing, and make their own energy by processing biological waste.

By combining several functions into a single business, the plan removes several classic, profit-consuming middlemen in the meat business.

Other options are also being considered. Dave Evans is enthusiastic about the proposed slaughterhouse, but concerned that the planning and construction process will take too long. He is investigating the possibility of operating a mobile slaughterhouse.

These high-tech vehicles are look like an 18-wheeler big-rig and are equipped to process animals on-site, which would allow small local farmers to continue operating their business without introducing the long-distance shipping that they see as both impractical and counter to their philosophy of locally grown food. A large vehicle could process 20 cows per day.

Evans points out that it would be a challenge to get a mobile abattoir approved in California, though they are operating and certified by the USDA in other states.

Both North Coast Meats and Evans hope to steer the direction of agriculture in an unconventional direction designed to benefit the rancher and the consumer above any middlemen. "If the rancher is going to be able to survive they are going to need higher margin products," said Goldberger. "I see slaughterhouses as just one link in that chain."