



POSITION PAPER
ON-FARM SLAUGHTER

an innovative solution to enhance animal welfare
and develop local and regional markets

Introduction

The Corona crisis brought to light the slaughterhouses' issues where in many countries the pandemic seemed to be particularly expanding. Not only did it show the poor working conditions in most slaughterhouses, but it is also reflected another major issue for livestock farming: the slow but sure disappearance of local abattoirs. Over the last decades, many local abattoirs disappeared or specialised only in a few animal species while slaughtering a growing number of animals.

As a result, it has become increasingly difficult for farmers to find slaughterhouses close to their farm, which directly impacts the farmer's capacity to avoid long distance transport for animals and hinders the development of direct and local markets. In addition, few abattoirs are certified organised which limits the labelling and identification of organic meat.

The lack of slaughterhouses has a direct effect on animal welfare, farmers work and consumer expectations. Animals suffer particularly from the long transports and the poor slaughter conditions. Farmers who raised their animals with care suffer from not being able to offer them a proper ending. Consumers are now increasingly aware of animal welfare and looking for direct markets, taking these criteria into account in their food purchasing choices.

An appropriate solution to this situation is provided by the possibility to practice on-farm slaughter which is supported by the Biodynamic Federation Demeter International. It is the best possible solution to offer a dignified end-of-life for an animal, but also enables farmers to both receive a fair price for their work and to meet consumers' demand for high welfare, local and regional products.

This is even more true in biodynamic agriculture, as animals play a central role. Among other things, animal husbandry plays a key role for farmyard manure, for building up soil fertility and to produce the biodynamic preparations. At the same time, the high degree of specialisation and intensification in agriculture pose a great challenge for animal husbandry. On-farm slaughter is one way to provide an innovative solution to a variety of challenges that animal husbandry is facing.

On-farm slaughter: what is it and why?

On-farm slaughter: a definition

On-farm slaughter means that the killing of an animal for meat consumption takes place on the farm itself, the carcass is then transported to an authorised slaughterhouse which is responsible for ensuring that high hygiene standards are upheld.

On-farm slaughter methods

Different methods are currently in use for on-farm slaughter but depending on the countries not all of them are authorised or possible from an economic perspective, offering a limited choice for farmers.

On-farm slaughtering can be carried out by a mobile slaughter truck that travels from farm to farm or by killing the animal on site and then transporting the carcass to a slaughterhouse that processes the meat under optimal hygienic conditions. The mobile abattoir truck enables the infrastructure needed to move the process of slaughter from farm to farm. Although it requires substantial investment it is often a preferred solution as it is easier. It has already been successfully implemented in Sweden for instance.¹

If the slaughter cannot be carried out by a mobile abattoir, the killing must be accomplished on-farm for which different possibilities exist: the slaughter might be carried out in a farm building, in a meadow or in an outdoor enclosure.²

- Shooting in the meadow is appropriate for cattle living outdoors year-round, especially those who have little contact with humans. This is the easiest and less stressful solution for the animals. Cattle can then be considered as farmed game, like deer for instance.
- Shooting in an outdoor enclosure should be used in preference to shooting in the meadow, if the animals are accustomed to stay in a pen and remain quiet. Compared to shooting in the meadow it presents fewer risks (less shooting failure and better cleanliness of the place of slaughter) which is why it is more appropriate for animals regularly kept in enclosures. This method is used in Germany and in Switzerland for instance.
- Shooting in a farm building presents even further advantages in terms of both hygiene and animal safety during the slaughter. This method is appropriate for sheep and pigs, as well as cattle.

In general, and independently of the method chosen, slaughter on the farm must be coupled with the taking over of the body by a fixed or mobile slaughterhouse for cutting and requires a transport of the remains, which must be optimised to avoid contamination of the meat. If the transport of the animal is properly managed, the health quality of the meat is not at risk. It can become a challenge in the absence of mobile slaughter trucks or a close slaughterhouse. Indeed, for hygienic reasons the animal must be transported within 45 minutes of their death to an authorised slaughterhouse to be eviscerated. Depending on the area this is not always possible, slaughterhouses being often more than 45 minutes away from a farm. In France alone, nearly half of the farmers state that their animals must travel more than 100 km to be slaughtered according to a study carried out in July 2020.³ The number of slaughterhouses went down from 1 200 in 1970 to 263 in 2016.⁴

1 Hälsingestintan - A mobile abattoir, High Nature Value Farming, 2019,

www.hnmlink.eu/download/Sweden_Mobileabattoir.pdf

2 Abattage a la ferme, Nature et Progrès, August 2018,

<https://natproconsommateurs.files.wordpress.com/2018/11/dossier-abattage-a-la-ferme-2018-ok.pdf>

3 Plus de 100 km pour faire abattre ses animaux : problématique ou pas ?, Web-agri, July 2020,

www.web-agri.fr/actualite-agricole/economie-social/article/plus-de-100-km-pour-faire-abattre-ses-animaux-problematique-ou-pas-1142-170789.html

4 Les projets d'abattage a la ferme connaissent un coup d'accélérateur, Le Monde, July 2020,

www.lemonde.fr/planete/article/2020/07/31/les-projets-d-abattage-mobile-a-la-ferme-connaissent-un-coup-d-accelereur_6047804_3244.html

On-farm slaughter: advantages

Animal welfare

The first obvious advantage of on-farm slaughter is improved animal welfare. Especially in species-appropriate organic livestock production, on-farm slaughter can be considered as a logical continuation both for the animal and the farmer. Transport means stress for the animals, particularly for animals who have lived outside for most of their lives. The longer the duration of transport, the more stress it creates for the animal, with a tremendously negative impact on the end-of-life for an animal. This is especially in stark contrast with the aims of organic livestock production which really focus on improving living conditions of animals.

Not only does the lack of local abattoirs increase the transport duration for the animals, it also comes with increased slaughtering rates, poor end-of-life conditions for animals and poor working conditions in the slaughterhouses in which workers have to cope with increased rates of production. All in all, it creates a spiral of negative consequences for the animals and the farmers who see no option but to participate in this industrial system which is so at odds with the rest of the animal's life.

As a contrast, on-farm slaughter enables a farmer to uphold the welfare objectives articulated in organic agriculture from beginning to end of an animal's life. Recent pilot projects show that on-farm slaughter reduces stress for animals.⁵ Their lives are ended in familiar surroundings and with dignity. In addition, on-farm slaughter is more suited to alternative breeds which often do not conform to traditional marketing standards. Therefore, on-farm slaughter can also enhance the development of local and traditional breeds.

Reinforcement of local and regional markets

The optimisation of animal welfare has a positive impact on the quality of meat. A study conducted by a university shows the improved meat quality of animals killed on farm.⁶ This is valuable for the farmer as he can bring quality products to market and can market them as such. It also meets the consumer demand for improved animal welfare. Consumers are increasingly looking for products which can guarantee high welfare for animals and which are local and regional.

Therefore, on-farm slaughter supports the possibility of direct marketing for the farmer, creating an interesting niche market where the use of conventional slaughter methods is very limited when it comes to marketing opportunities. Supporting direct marketing also creates added value in rural communities while reinforcing local and regional markets. In times of a worldwide pandemic one can only see the advantages of enhancing local and regional markets.

5 Hof- und Weideschlachtung zur Fleischgewinnung auf dem Hof, Bio Aktuell, July 2020, www.bioaktuell.ch/tierhaltung/schlachtung.html

6 Hofschlachtung von Rinder per Kugelschuss Methode, Universität Kassel, 2015, www.bioaktuell.ch/fileadmin/documents/ba/tierhaltung/rindvieh/bioweidemast/Schiffer-Diss-2015-de.pdf

What needs to be done?

Legislative framework

At the European level, the protection of animals at the time of killing is governed by EC Regulation 1099/2009.⁷ To complement this Regulation, the European Commission published a ‘Study on the preparation of best practices on the protection of animals at the time of killing’⁸ in 2017. Following the study, a series of factsheets were published to help workers in small abattoirs and farmers to better understand and apply the EU legislation on the protection of animals at the time of killing.⁹ However, if one looks at these different documents, the legislative situation at European level appears to be quite different depending on the methods used for on-farm slaughter.

In case of the use of mobile abattoirs, the EC Regulation 1099/2009 art. 14 §3 allows the adoption of national provisions regarding mobile abattoirs. In Recital 40 of the Regulation, it is clearly stated that:

*“mobile slaughterhouses reduce the need for animals to be transported over long distances and therefore may contribute to safeguarding animal welfare. However, technical constraints for mobile slaughterhouses differ from fixed slaughterhouses and technical rules may need to be consequently adapted. Therefore, this Regulation should provide for the possibility to establish derogations exempting mobile slaughterhouses from the requirements on layout, construction and equipment of slaughterhouses. Pending the adoption of such derogations, it is appropriate to allow Member States to establish or maintain national rules regarding mobile slaughterhouses”.*¹⁰

Therefore, it is up to every Member State to encourage the development of mobile slaughterhouses by adopting national provisions to allow their use. In France, for instance, provision of the Agriculture and Food Law (EGalim) paved the way in April 2019 for the trials of mobile slaughterhouses.¹¹

The legislative situation is more complicated in the case of on-farm slaughter itself. In fact, chapter IV of EC Regulation 853/2004 foresees that only living animals can be taken to the slaughterhouse for sanitary reasons with the exceptions listed in the Annex III of the Regulation (emergency slaughter, home slaughtering and farmed game).¹² Germany, for instance, made use of this exception list to authorise the on-farm killing for animals living outside all year.

7 EC Regulation 1099/2009, September 2009,

<https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:32009R1099&from=EN>

8 Preparation of best practices on the protection of animals at the time of killing, European Commission, November 2017,

<https://op.europa.eu/en/publication-detail/-/publication/ea4ef3e9-cda5-11e7-a5d5-01aa75ed71a1/language-en>

9 Factsheets, European Commission, 2018,

https://ec.europa.eu/food/animals/welfare/practice/slaughter/2018-factsheets_en

10 EC Regulation 1099/2009, September 2009,

<https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:32009R1099&from=EN>

11 Decret nr. 2019-3224, Legifrance, April 2019,

<https://www.legifrance.gouv.fr/jorf/id/JORFTEXT000038376735>

12 EC Regulation 853/2004, April 2004,

<https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:32004R0853&from=EN>

However, if on-farm slaughter is to be considered as a regular slaughtering procedure it would have to undergo the following requirements mentioned in EC Regulation 853/2004 and EC Regulation 1099/2009: cattle fixation, stunning by bolt device, bleeding of the animal within 60 seconds after stunning, collection of blood and its adequate disposal and the living transfer of the animal to the slaughterhouse.

Consequently, this means that the animal must be transported within 45 minutes to the slaughterhouse, that stunning can only be carried out by the bolt-shot method (the bullet shooting method being reserved for animals living outside all year long), that the slaughtering process must always take place on the premises of an approved slaughterhouse (stunning may be carried out outside, but not killing by blood deprivation), the EU approval of a slaughterhouse may include a mobile slaughter unit and that the fixation devices must either be part of the mobile slaughter unit or be checked by the authority to ensure its proper working.

So far, on-farm slaughter is authorised in Germany, Switzerland, Denmark and France with specific provisions and restrictions in each country (different on-farm slaughter methods are authorised in each country). A harmonised approach at EU level would be a better solution since the different frameworks between each Member State have the potential to provide obstacles to the further development of on-farm slaughter. With this aim a reinforcement of the current legal basis is needed so that on-farm slaughter is not only considered in exceptional circumstances but has the potential to become a standard procedure. In addition, non-legal initiatives should be further promoted at European level such as the development of guidance and documenting best practice.

In the framework of the European Green Deal and the publication of the Farm to Fork Strategy, the European Commission foresees a revision of the existing animal welfare legislation in 2023, including legislation regarding animal transport and slaughter.¹³ This could be the opportunity at European level to go a step further and specifically allow on-farm slaughter as an innovative solution to enhance animal welfare.

Technical and economic support

In addition to a harmonised European framework for on-farm slaughter, technical and economic support play an essential role in its development. So far, an increasing number of pilot projects exist in different Member States demonstrating that operational costs of mobile abattoirs are high, especially in comparison with conventional slaughter methods. Therefore, public support would be needed for the development of public mobile abattoirs or for the trailers used to carry the carcasses of on-farm slaughtered animals to local abattoirs.

The current public abattoirs often benefit from vital financial support when it comes to the development and consolidation of their infrastructure.¹⁴ However, this doesn't stop a continuous decrease in the current number of slaughterhouses making it even more relevant to invest in innovative solutions to support high welfare livestock production.

¹³ Farm to Fork Strategy, European Commission, May 2020, https://ec.europa.eu/food/sites/food/files/safety/docs/f2f_action-plan_2020_strategy-info_en.pdf

¹⁴ Abattage à la ferme, Nature et Progrès, August 2018, <https://natproconsommateurs.files.wordpress.com/2018/11/dossier-abattage-a-la-ferme-2018-ok.pdf>

Even if the costs for operational processes are higher, a recent Eurobarometer study shows that more than half of European citizens are willing to pay more for animal welfare-friendly products.¹⁵ A higher price would cover part of these higher costs and create significant added value. Thanks to the development of direct marketing, on-farm slaughter would reinforce local and regional markets, as well as offer new economic prospects for farmers.

Reinforcement of small slaughterhouses

To further develop on-farm slaughter, it is essential to also support small abattoirs across Europe. As mentioned before, the loss of small local abattoirs has led to a significant increase in the distance that animals are transported. Infringements of legal requirements are frequent, in that transport is overloaded, transport times are exceeded and there is a lack of water. All these elements combine to create poor conditions and therefore stress for animals. This is even more traumatic for animals who have never left their farm before.

The support of small local abattoirs is crucial not only to support high animal welfare standards but also to support on-farm slaughter. Since the animal must be transported within an hour from the farm to the slaughterhouse, it is essential to ensure a broad spread of abattoirs. If the distances are too far, it might jeopardize the whole process. Small slaughterhouses also provide traditional artisanal ways of slaughtering and processing of animals that is important for local and regional markets and supports direct marketing processes and more adapted to the different animal species, and special breeds.

Conclusion

On-farm slaughter presents many advantages that are worthy of consideration: it improves animal welfare and creates added value by offering new ways to develop direct marketing. The Biodynamic Federation Demeter International sees it as an innovative solution to be further encouraged. If we want to set ambitious targets for animal husbandry according to the Farm to Fork Strategy and develop local and regional markets supporting on-farm slaughter is the way forward. This would require:

- Legislative measures to guarantee a harmonised approach at European level and to reinforce the current legal basis to allow on-farm slaughter;
- Technical and economic support, especially at the beginning to develop the infrastructure;
- A reinforcement of small and local abattoirs, essential for the development of direct marketing.

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¹⁵ Special Eurobarometer 442, European Commission, November–December 2015, https://data.europa.eu/euodp/en/data/dataset/S2096_84_4_442_ENG