

They're Building Their Own Meat Packing Plant

Faced with skyrocketing meat processing costs and butchers who sometimes do poor quality work, Walter Jeffries decided he couldn't afford not to build an on-farm packing house for his pigs. He already had a string of restaurants, grocery stores and other customers who wanted his pork. The only problem he had once he made the decision was he couldn't get financing to have the facility built.

"I knew I could build and equip a processing facility for about \$150,000," says Jeffries. "It would pay for itself in under five years based on what we would save on custom processing."

Payback was based on eliminating average costs above and beyond processing of \$114 per pig - costs associated with mistakes and poor quality processing and handling by custom slaughterhouses. On-farm slaughter would also eliminate about 37,000 miles transporting pigs off the farm and bringing pork back. Hired processing costs Jeffries \$47 for every \$100 earned by the farm. Doing the work themselves turns that cost into profit.

"If we do our own processing, we can more than double our net income without raising our prices or getting bigger," he says.

Unfortunately he quickly found out that positive income projections weren't enough. Banks didn't want to deal with an on-farm project, much less a slaughter facility. They especially didn't want to finance something not built by a high-priced construction company. The only answer was for the family to finance it themselves. So they did.

"We have spent about \$26,000 of our own money bootstrapping the project from the base foundation on up," says Jeffries. "In addition, we have received loans from another local farmer, an excavator, a lumberyard and electric supply company for \$22,000 in the form of cash, services and extended payment terms on supplies. All

were appreciated and needed."

Over the past 6 mos. Jeffries, his wife, two teenage sons and a younger daughter built a 1,300 sq. ft. slaughterhouse. All engineering, concrete, plumbing and electrical work were done by the family. About the only thing they didn't do themselves was to install a bigger transformer. They also had to hire a septic system designer.

While the work started in July 2009, preparation started five years earlier as Jeffries began gathering information. When he learned in April 2008 that one, if not two, of the processors he took pigs to was going to quit, plans moved into high gear. It took 9 mos. to get the training needed to write a food safety plan. At the same time, he, his wife and oldest son apprenticed to a local butcher and began taking commercial meat cutting classes. Jeffries also began meeting with USDA and Vermont meat inspectors and anyone else whose approval he would need. He fine-tuned plans with their input and completed all the regulatory permitting required.

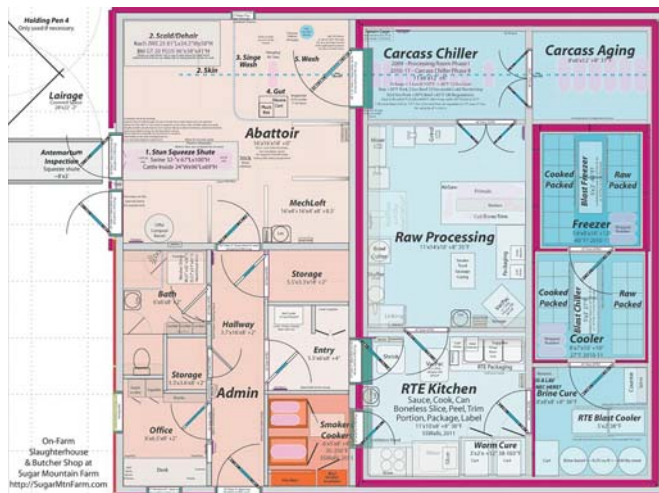
Along the way he learned a lot, including the importance of not breaking new ground. By building on the foundation of a 20-year old barn, he was able to move faster, such as getting zoning permission. He also found that inspectors appreciate being asked for input before work is done and credits state and federal meat inspectors with improving his plans.

"They pointed out little things, like where a sink should go, to improve my work flow," says Jeffries.

He broke the building plan up into lots of little rooms with dedicated purposes. The inspectors liked that as it makes it easier to inspect. It also made it easier for Jeffries to get his plans approved.

Plans were scaled down from older USDA plans. As it is, the new facility is built to handle up to 20 animals a day. However, Jeffries plans to do about 10 a week.

Throughout the building process, Jeffries



Drawing courtesy Walter Jeffries, Sugar Mountain Farm

Walter Jeffries built an on-farm packing house for pigs, breaking the building plan up into many little rooms.

has recycled whatever materials he could. He has also earned a great deal about cooling.

"Our goal was to stop the movement of energy across barriers," explains Jeffries. "We did that by building a large thermal mass in the concrete walls and floors to store energy with a lot of insulation to slow movement."

Jeffries built forms for the poured concrete with sheets of foam insulation that adhere to the poured concrete. The design of the building ensures that when energy (heat or cold) does escape an area, it continues to provide benefits. For example, heat from the rooftop compressor will be channeled to rooms that would otherwise have to be heated.

The meat cutting and cooling areas, with their own poured concrete and insulation walls, are essentially a box within a box. Within that area, poured concrete freezer walls form a third box within a box. It's designed to stay at a constant 40° F below zero. Cold that escapes through the floor slab under the freezer is carried by in-floor tubing to help cool surrounding areas like the processing room and the kitchen. If a door is opened in

the freezer, the escaping cold air moves into the cooler, then the brine cooler and finally to the kitchen.

The septic system only handles wastes from bathrooms and the kitchen. All slaughter wastes are composted on the farm and will eventually be spread on the fields, saving waste management costs and reducing the size of the septic system that would have been needed.

When FARM SHOW spoke with Jeffries in early December, work was nearly finished. He estimated he still needed about \$65,000 to get the plant equipped and running on a bare bones level.

Jeffries has kept an ongoing record of work and resources posted on his website and blog. It's full of information that would be of use to anyone considering the same type of project.

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Stove Passion Creates Red Hot Business

If you want a cheap wood stove, go to a big box store or build one yourself. But if you want an "exceptional" wood or coal stove with nickel-plated cast iron castings and even jewels and precious metals, call Bill or Chrissy McCann. The two went from buying a single antique wood stove to becoming collectors and then dealers. They now have more than 90 antique stoves displayed in their 5,000-sq. ft. showroom, which is open by invitation only.

"Our hobby has become a passion," say Bill. "We enjoy collecting, but we also restore stoves for others. We love preserving these old stoves because they're so few left and because they are beautiful to look at. They function just as well today as the day they were made."

The stove that started it all was a 3-ft. tall Giant Oak. Once they started talking to other collectors, they found that many were at the end of a collecting career and had stoves for sale. They also began looking for stoves they could rescue, buying them at estate sales and from antique stores. They quickly learned the difference between an old stove and a collectible.

"Everybody thinks theirs is valuable, but that's because they've never seen hard

coal burners with tiles and dragons and jewels in the door," says McCann. "A collector looks for the craftsmanship and the graphics involved in the stove. In the 1880's, the highest paid people in a stove company were the carvers who made the decorative forms that were cast."

McCann describes stoves with cherubs, faces and portraits. People who have them today tend to know the difference, he says. For a collector like himself, even an expensive stove may be worth it, especially if he can clean it up and restore it to its original glory. Sometimes that gets pricey.

"The most expensive stove I've sold was \$17,500," he says. "Most are in the ballpark of \$2,500 to \$5,000. The most expensive stove I have heard of was in the range of \$39,000, but the buyer had money, and price was not a concern."

McCann encourages people to get involved in collecting for the sake of the people you'll meet and the beauty of the stoves. If you get the passion, you may also get a business as he and his wife did. Last year they did nearly \$50,000 in sales, and that was with virtually no advertising, just word of mouth. With two other businesses to run, he says, he doesn't have time to deal with window shoppers.



Bill and Chrissy McCann enjoy collecting and restoring beautiful antique wood stoves. More than 90 different stoves are on display in their 5,000-sq. ft. showroom.

That's why he doesn't give out his address. "I don't like to waste time, but if people are interested in buying or selling a stove, I would love to visit with them," says McCann.

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