

Small Scale Slaughter

Small Scale Slaughter Facilities Regulation Regulations relating to killing and processing birds (or indeed any other animal) are complex and inconsistent. If you are intending doing more than home kill for home consumption they can be a minefield.

Classes of regulation There are two levels of regulation:

- Exempt slaughter facilities. The exempt licence was originally created for farmers wishing to raise Christmas poultry. For some odd reason it was originally administered by the planning officer for the area. Now, more properly, the Environmental Health Office (EHO) has taken this role. The key thing with an EHO license is that you are only allowed to kill your own birds. It was designed to suit small scale seasonal production, and is limited to 10000 birds a year. You can sell to retailers but not wholesalers, and only then in your own and the neighbouring authorities (although if you are selling by mail order you can sell to anyone). It does not require a vet to be present when you are killing and requires a relatively low level of investment

- Meat Hygiene Service (MHS). An MHS licence allows you to sell to anyone, anywhere. There is no limit on numbers and you can kill other people's birds. However, a vet has to be present every time you kill or eviscerate, for which you have to pay (about £60/hour) and he or she has to be booked a month in advance. The level of initial investment will be higher, as the facilities will have to meet MHS standards.

Regardless of which level you are licensed at, there are certain key requirements, these are:

- Washable floors and walls with good drainage. Plastic coated cladding and a resin floor are the regulator's materials of choice but they are expensive. A resin paint for the walls and polished concrete floors are cheaper options while still meet the standards though will require more maintenance.

- Killing and eviscerating must be separated by space or time.

- Packing and cutting, likewise must be separated from the evisceration operation by space or time (eg you can carry these operations out in the same area provided that after evisceration the area is cleaned down before packing or cutting is started. If carried out at the same time must be separated by space, eg carried out in a different area)

- You must have fridges capable of reducing the temperature to 40C (as opposed to just holding it there).

Buildings

Planning

If you are contemplating converting an existing farm building to a slaughter facility for an exempt licence you should be able to achieve this without requiring planning permission for change of use. This is on the basis that it is an extension of the farm business; the onward processing of your birds. Precedents have established this although, not having required planning, documented evidence is not always easy to find. The final decision is down to your planning office.

Design As discussed above the floor and walls must be washable, and good drainage is imperative. It is a misconception that facilities have to be large and complicated. You can, and some people do, run a small operation (100 birds a day) in a 40ft old fridge trailer. They are small which limits the number of people that can work in them, and you have to leave time between killing and evisceration. However the walls and floor are adequate and if you partition the far end you can utilise the existing fridge unit, if it has the capacity to deal with warm bodies.

In terms of process, you move from 'dirty' through to 'clean' areas. The birds come into the lairage, from there to the killing area, eviscerating, cutting and packaging area, strictly in that order and then exit as the finished product. Ideally the whole building should be sloping down to the dirty area

Process and equipment

In a small scale facility the birds are normally placed head first into a cone on a carousel, they are stunned and then bled. It takes about a minute and a half for a bird to bleed to death. By the time the sixth bird is stunned and bled the first is dead and is put into the scald tank cage. Once the scald tank has six birds in it, it is turned on. The scald tank holds a volume of water at around 54C. The cage with the six birds in it rotates in this water for around a minute and a half. From there they are manually removed and placed into the bowl plucker. The bowl plucker is a series of rotating rubber fingers. Thirty seconds in this machine will see the birds plucked. The wings and legs can either then be finished by hand or with a finishing machine. With such equipment two people can kill and pluck around 120 chickens per hour.

Normally the plucked birds are stored on wheeled A frames which, when full, move into the eviscerating area. This should be separated by a door if eviscerating is to be carried out while killing is still in progress. This is to stop air borne contamination while eviscerating. Once eviscerated and dressed, (if necessary), they are placed into the chillers. Cutting and packing are best done when the bird is cold.

Waterfowl cannot go through a wet plucking system described above. To get over the water proofing oils secreted by these birds a wet plucking system has to run at a very high temp. This will normally damage the skins of the birds. Instead such birds have to be plucked manually either by hand or with a dry plucker and then dipped in hot wax. After cooling in water the wax is peeled off removing any remaining down. It is possible for two people to kill, pluck and wax around 30-40 ducks per hour with this type of equipment.

A small scale slaughter facility (up to 400-500/ day) will need:

- Shackles, Carousel, (£200-300),
- stunner, (£250),
- scald tank, (£2000)
- bowl plucker, (£2000-2500),
- finishing machine, (1500-2000)
- eviscerating table, (800),

- stainless steel tables,
- scales,
- over wrapper,
- knives (1000)

Using good second hand machinery you would expect to pay £7000 – £10,000 for chickens For ducks you also need a

- dry plucking machine (£2500-3000)
- a wax bath, (£700).

Waste You can either pay for the waste (eviscerate, feathers etc) to be taken away or incinerate it your self. If the latter you will need to purchase an approved incinerator that has to be licensed with the animal health office. Such a machine will cost around £5000-6000. All washings from the facility also have to be tanked and collected or put through a suitable reed bed system.

Barriers to local processing facilities

The key barriers to the establishment of a network of local killing and processing facilities are regulatory. Specifically, it is the requirement of the MHS to have a vet at £60/ hour standing over you while you kill the birds. This makes it prohibitively expensive for small scale operations, but without it you cannot kill anyone else's birds.

The solution to the problem would be to change the exempt slaughterhouse regulations to allow small-scale processors (say less than 20,000 birds/ year) kill other people's birds. Logically this should not cause undue problems to the EHO. The risk to the public is no greater than if a producer only kills his own birds. In any case, the EHO (in contrast to the MHS) places the onus on the consumer to cook birds properly prior to consumption.

There are doubtless a large number of EHO registered abattoirs already established and this relatively minor change in the regulation would go a long way to addressing what has, up until now, been a pretty intractable problem

Disclaimer: This article is intended as a guide only. Regulations and prices are subject to change and you are strongly advised to check with your local Planning Department and Environmental Health Office before proceeding. You should contact the Meat Hygiene Service <http://www.food.gov.uk/foodindustry/meat/mhservice/mhscontacts/> if you plan to register an abattoir with them. Steve Merritt, July 2009

If you are in Wales or England and thinking of setting up a small scale poultry abattoir, you can book an on site private consultancy visit with Steve Merritt of The Welsh Poultry Centre. For more information call Steve on 0795 625 6278.

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