Both livestock producers and household consumers are increasingly interested in alternative marketing and purchasing arrangements such as direct marketing and custom meat production. Consumers are attracted to the idea of a fresh, wholesome and locally-produced product; producers are attracted to greater potential profits, increased control over pricing, direct contact with consumers and pride in the production of a quality product.

As you would expect, numerous laws and regulations control the handling, processing and sale of custom meat. These laws vary between states and counties. Counties are required to have regulations that are at least as strict as their state, but some counties have even stricter custom meat requirements. This article is simply an overview of custom meat; it is essential that anyone interested in custom meat investigate the laws and regulations that apply to his/her area.

Retail meat that consumers purchase in grocery stores has been processed and inspected at United States Department of Agriculture-approved facilities. It bears the USDA stamp and can be sold to any consumer anywhere in the country. “Custom meat” is also known as “uninspected meat.” The term applies to all parts of meat animals such as cattle, hogs, goats and sheep. This meat is exempt from the Federal Meat Inspection Act because it is intended for personal household use ONLY; by law, it cannot be sold, traded, bartered or even given away. It can only be consumed by household members, their relatives or non-paying guests. It should not be used for pot luck or other community meals outside the home.

Regardless of state or local differences, here are some general regulations that pertain to custom meat transactions:

1. Livestock producers must only sell live animals. It is illegal to sell or transfer ownership of any part of a custom meat animal after it has been slaughtered. In cases where multiple persons purchase a live animal, names of each buyer must be provided to the slaughterer and cut/wrap facility. After the sale, the producer may transport sold anima(s) to the slaughter facility as a courtesy to the new owner(s) for an additional fee.

2. Buyer(s)/consumer(s) must purchase the live animal, contact the processing facility and indicate how much of the animal they own (half, quarter, etc.). They also give meat cutting instructions to the cut/wrap facility operator and specify all the carcass parts that they want returned to them—liver, dog bones, heart, tongue, tripe, etc.

3. Custom slaughterers may slaughter animals for owners on the owner’s property using a mobile processing unit or at a custom slaughtering establishment at a fixed location; different regulations apply to both situations. Custom slaughterers must record all information about the live animal sale, including names of all owners of the animal. This information must be shared with the cut/wrap facility operator. The custom meat slaughter must tag custom meat animals with special tags with the owners’ names; these tags also indicate the animal is not for sale. All parts of the carcass and its by-products
must be identified with the owners’ names at all times. The custom slaughterer must provide the owner with information about the weight of the live animal, carcass weight and weight of products delivered to the owner. The slaughterer may assume ownership of the hide if the owner does not want it. Custom meat facilities may also have a co-located retail business that sells inspected, pre-packaged meat products to the public.

4. Cut-wrap facility operators cut carcasses into traditional cuts or as indicated by the owner. The cutter/wrapper never owns any part of the carcass and must render all carcass parts that are not returned to the owner; these non-inspected parts cannot be sold to another party, incorporated into other products or consumed by any non-owner. All carcasses and parts must be identified with their owners’ names and with the words “not for sale” (+/- “not inspected”) from the point of slaughter, through the cut and wrap process and delivery to the owner. For sausage or other ground meat products, added fat or trim must be from USDA-inspected meat sources or custom animals owned by the same customer who owns the end product.

In both Oregon and Washington, legal codes regulate the licensing and operation of custom meat processing facilities. These regulations govern issues such as refrigeration, sanitation, employee health, recordkeeping, labeling, packaging, storage and so forth. For Washington’s custom meat codes, refer to Chapter 16.49 of the Revised Code of Washington and Washington Administrative Code 16-19. For Oregon, see Oregon Administrative Rule 603-028 and Oregon Revised Statute 603.045. The introduction to this latter statute summarizes the purpose of all custom slaughter and processing regulations: “to protect the people of this state from the purchase, use or consumption of uninspected or unwholesome meat or meat products.” Whether meat is processed through conventional or custom processes, putting wholesome and high-quality meat products on the table requires that everyone from producers to processors to consumers follow all safe food handling regulations and recommendations.

Resources:
1. “What is Custom Meat?” brochure published by the Washington State Department of Agriculture, Food Safety and Animal Health Division
5. Your county health department
Custom Meat Contacts
Washington State Department of Agriculture
Food Safety & Animal Health Division
P.O. Box 42560
111 Washington St. SE
Olympia, WA  98504-2560
(360) 902-2095
(360) 902-1996 (TDD)
Http://www.wa.gov/agr/food.htm
Oregon Department of Agriculture
Food Safety Division
635 Capitol St. NE
Salem, OR  97301-2532
(503) 986-4720
(503) 986-4762 (TTY)
Http://egov.oregon.gov/ODA