

Halal Slaughter

Contrary to the overall declining trend in the United States' lamb, mutton, and goat consumption, there is a growing, high-value market to be found among the American Muslim population. Entrance into this particular market, as well as Muslim markets overseas, requires Halal certification.

Halal is an Islamic religious term used to describe food that is "lawful" to eat. It is similar to Kosher in the Jewish religion in many ways. Many slaughterhouses in the United States already meet the standards set by the American Muslim community for Halal status. The USDA has had a policy on Halal labeling in effect since 1996. Halal requirements are not difficult to meet, and the USDA believes that any American slaughterhouse should be able to comply with the new Halal policy. The general requirements for Halal slaughter state that the animal must be humanely treated en route to and at the slaughterhouse. The throat must be slit in a certain way, while the word "Allah" (God) is said. The blood must then be drained from the body. It is vital that the sheep carcass does not come in contact with pork, or anything that has ever touched pork, at the slaughterhouse.

The U.S. government is negotiating with several major Muslim countries to gain acceptance of U.S. Halal standards as equivalent to their own. This will open more markets to U.S. lamb and mutton exporters, as at least twenty Muslim countries require Halal certification for meat. There are 1.5 billion Muslims throughout the world, so the potential market for Halal meat is very large. Currently the United States is negotiating with Saudi Arabia (any agreement would extend to the rest of the Gulf Cooperation Council: Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, United Arab Emirates, and Bahrain), Egypt, and Malaysia.

There is a market in Saudi Arabia every year for live sheep that meet Halal standards for sacrifice: over the age of six months, in good health, and showing no defects. Between one and two million sheep are sacrificed at the end of the Haj (pilgrimage to Mecca) every year. New Zealand and several Middle Eastern and African states currently dominate the live export market to Saudi Arabia.

A good example of the benefits of Halal certification is New Zealand's export lamb and mutton industry. New Zealand, which does not have the incentive of a domestic Muslim population like the United States, has had an official Halal program since 1983. Today New Zealand is the largest exporter of Halal slaughtered lamb and mutton in the world. As their markets in Muslim countries increased, New Zealand expanded Halal production. In 1991 there were 29 approved Halal slaughtering plants, and by 1998 the number increased to 42. Approximately 78 percent of all sheep slaughter (and 50 percent of beef) in New Zealand is Halal certified today. They ship Halal meat to both Halal and non-Halal markets. New Zealand found Halal slaughter to be so easy and so profitable that it was cost effective for them to send animals to Halal slaughterhouses regardless of whether the meat would be exported to a Halal market or not.