# Reindeer processing unit moved to Western Alaska

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Like herds of northern cattle that lived on tundra plants, more than 600,000 reindeer ranged over Alaska less than a century ago. Today reindeer numbers are down to about 10,000 or so, due to their tendency to elope with caribou, be eaten by wolves and bears, and other reasons.

Managers with the University of Alaska Fairbanks Reindeer Research Program are trying to give a boost to the reindeer industry on the Seward Peninsula by providing a mobile slaughter facility along with an expert instructor who knows how to use it.

Greg Finstad is head of the reindeer program at UAF and a man who has wrangled reindeer alongside Alaska Natives for 25 years. He ordered a 45-foot self-contained slaughter plant, winterized it, had it barged to Nome and helped design a "high-latitude range management course" at the university campus there. To run the program, Finstad hired Heikki Muhonen of Finland, who will live in Nome for about two years.

"He's the world's expert," Finstad said. "He's set up slaughter facilities all across Russia, Kazakhstan, Finland, Sweden and Norway."

One of Finstad's goals with the U.S. Department of Agriculture-funded project is to teach local people how to process reindeer using the plant, which is approved by the USDA and will result in inspected steaks, backstrap, burger and other cuts of meat.

"(Inspected meat) is worth a lot more money," Finstad said. "It can be sold to restaurants and stores. It's the key to success in the reindeer field."

The reindeer industry on the Seward Peninsula is not what it once was.

Following the migration of caribou onto the Seward Peninsula in the 1990s -- when some herders saw hundreds of their animals drift off with the wild version of their species -- there are now just a few viable herds in the area. Two are in the Teller area, and others roam the muskeg near Stebbins/St. Michael, Nome, Wales and on St. Lawrence Island.

Finstad said the mobile processing plant can be barged to areas with reindeer, and Muhonen will train people how to use it in different areas, with the goal of inspiration.

"We're hoping this is a catalyst to get the industry moving," Finstad said. "Right now reindeer producers can't afford a slaughter plant. Once they get their feet wet, we hope they'll do it on their own. We want to go from place to place, then it'll be up to herders to purchase their own small plant."

Muhonen is from a small village in Finland. He visited the Seward Peninsula at the invite of UAF a few other times, giving meat-cutting clinics in different villages. He knows how to set up a processing plant, and he has experience working to train people on how to make it pay off, Finstad said.

"(Muhonen's) really good at working with Natives on the Seward Peninsula," Finstad said. "He's pretty good at cutting meat too."

Finstad hopes the course and the slaughter facility will give villagers more ideas and options, not necessarily related to reindeer.

"It's a chance to engage them with their local environment," he said. "We feel it's very important that the management of natural resources should come from local people."

Finstad and Muhonen recently met in Nome with Rose Fosdick, director of the Reindeer Herders Association that is part of the Alaska Native corporation Kawerak, Inc. She represents the interests of the herders on the peninsula.

"It's the start of something," Fosdick said of the slaughter facility. "And it's great that the university is a part of it, because you don't start a reindeer-processing plant without someone knowledgeable, and that's Heikki Muhonen.

"In 10 years, if everything goes the way it should and could, all herders would have reindeer they could sell, and they'd have surplus animals they could supply markets statewide and nationally," Fosdick said. "And there'd be both mobile and stationary plants at the larger herds, and people would be able to make a living just handling reindeer herds."

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