

# MEAT PROCESSING

## CHALLENGES & OPPORTUNITIES

The American meat processing industry has struggled with consolidation for decades, trending towards fewer and larger corporations. But a fairer, more resilient food system is possible.

### CONSOLIDATION IN MEAT PROCESSING

Local meat processing is crucial for family farms who sell processed meat directly to consumers or through food co-ops and other retail venues. Access to local meat processing allows farmers to set their own price rather than having to sell animals through unpredictable conventional markets; it's an important pathway to ensuring a future for family farmers in Wisconsin. But for several years, Wisconsin Farmers Union has heard rising concerns from farmers about meat processing capacity challenges statewide. The lack of processing capacity is a stumbling block that hinders farmers from growing to meet consumer demand.

On a national level, meat processing has become increasingly vertically integrated. The four largest meatpackers control 54% of U.S. poultry processing, 66% of U.S. pork processing, and 82% of beef packing.<sup>1</sup> A mere 50 meat plants slaughter and process 98% of the national meat supply.<sup>2</sup> Investing in processing is an investment in the security of our food supply.

Meat Processing Infrastructure was among the Special Orders of Business set by the grassroots membership of WFU in 2021, and we continue to seek solutions. In March 2024, the USDA's "Product of USA" labeling rule was finalized, which requires meat, poultry, or egg products bearing the voluntary 'Product of USA' or 'Made in the USA' label be exclusively derived from animals born, raised, slaughtered, and processed in the United States. The USDA published updated labeling guidance with compliance beginning January 1, 2026.

**“We went from being able to get most of our needs met in our county to suddenly having to go significantly outside of the county for meat processing. We were at a point where I was getting worried I'd be butchering a bunch of pigs and lambs myself because it took me so long to find a processor.”**

*-- Rachel Henderson, WFU Member*



## WHAT WE CAN DO: STATE LEVEL

### **EXPAND MEAT PROCESSING INFRASTRUCTURE GRANTS**

Created in 2021, these DATCP grants aim to grow Wisconsin's meat industry and improve the long-term viability of the state's livestock industry.

### **INVEST IN MEAT PROCESSING AS CRITICAL RURAL INFRASTRUCTURE**

WFU advocates for financial support from public-private partnerships and County Economic Development agencies to increase processing capacity and state new state and USDA-inspected meat processors. Assisting custom-exempt livestock processors with the cost of state inspection would provide access to a broader market.

### **CONSIDER INNOVATIVE APPROACHES**

Wisconsin Farmers Union supports processors that offer USDA and DATCP, organic, Halal, and Kosher certification: as well as mobile and other on-farm processing facilities, and find end uses of animal by-products and waste." Mobile processing and other on-farm processing facilities are innovative approaches that could help farmers in regions that are especially suffering from a lack of processing capacity.

### **STREAMLINE REGULATIONS & EASE THE PROCESS FOR INTER-STATE SALES**

Allow meat product sales across state lines if inspected through state Meat and Poultry Inspection programs.

### **SUPPORT EFFORTS TO TRAIN THE NEXT GENERATION OF BUTCHERS**

There is a severe shortage of skilled butchers. WFU encourages support for training programs and the development of on-the-job training and apprenticeship programs for meat cutters.



## WHAT WE CAN DO: FEDERAL LEVEL

### **SUPPORT THE PROCESSING REVIVAL AND INTRASTATE MEAT EXEMPTION (PRIME) ACT**

Wisconsin Farmers Union supports federal adoption of the PRIME Act which permits the sale of meat processed by custom slaughterhouses that meet federal regulations direct-to-consumer or to restaurants and retailers within the producer's own state.

### **REINSTATE MANDATORY COUNTRY-OF-ORIGIN LABELING (COOL)**

Wisconsin Farmers Union supports the COOL requirements as mandated in the 2008 Farm Bill and calls again for Congress to address the demand from United States livestock raisers and consumers to label locations of birth, raising, and slaughter of livestock and urges its expansion to the labeling of all food products distributed and sold in the United States, this applies to all animal products.

### **STRONGER ENFORCEMENT OF ANTITRUST**

The "big four" (Tyson Foods, JBS, Cargill, and National Beef) has been accused of conspiring to fix cattle prices. Stronger scrutiny is needed to address antitrust in agriculture.

### **PASS THE STRENGTHENING LOCAL PROCESSING ACT**

This would create a competitive grant program for small and very small establishments, state inspected facilities, custom exempt facilities, or new small-scale slaughter facilities to help increase processing capacity and grow resiliency. It would also create two new grant programs for meat processing workforce training – one for colleges, universities, nonprofits, worker training centers, and others to establish or expand meat processing training programs and one for small and very small establishments or nongovernmental organizations to offset the cost of training new meat processors.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> [whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/blog/2021/09/08/addressing-concentration-in-the-meat-processing-industry-to-lower-food-prices-for-american-families/](https://whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/blog/2021/09/08/addressing-concentration-in-the-meat-processing-industry-to-lower-food-prices-for-american-families/)

<sup>2</sup> <https://modernfarmer.com/2020/10/opinion-farmers-need-more-meat-processing-options/>

<sup>3</sup> <https://pingree.house.gov/news/documentsingle.aspx?DocumentID=4484>