

PRIMER ON MEAT INSPECTION

STUDY RESOLUTION ISSUES

Under the HJ 29 study of meat inspections in Montana, the “meat” of the issue relates to the federal laws and regulations that apply to federally inspected meat processors. These are at the crux of all inspections.

- Federal inspections allow sales of meat products over state lines.
- State inspections must be equal to or better than the federal requirements and allow sales of state-inspected products within the state. If states do not meet the federal requirements, the state may lose its ability to offer state inspections.
- Custom slaughter, termed a custom exemption, is allowed under federal law. A custom butcher must undergo the same sanitation inspections twice a year that state or federal plants must have. The custom concept applies in cases in which a butcher handles livestock or poultry provided by the livestock or poultry owner and returned to the livestock or poultry owner but not sold.

STUDY RESOLUTION REQUESTS

Under the HJ 29 study of meat inspections, the study resolution asked the appropriate interim committee – in this case, the Economic Affairs Interim Committee – to undertake the following activities:

- Review relevant state and federal laws and rules.
- Review state and federal inspection practices and processes.
- Seek input from meatpackers, custom butchers, consumers, inspectors, public health officials, and others.

POSSIBLE ADD-ONS TO HJ 29 STUDY

In addition, the Economic Affairs Interim Committee might want to consider:

- Touring a state and a federally inspected meatpacking plant;
- Recommending to the full Legislature whether changes are appropriate for custom livestock and poultry processors and in particular whether the exemptions allowed under 81-9-218, MCA, for custom livestock or poultry slaughtering are being abused or, conversely, greater than those required for federal law;

- Looking at whether butchering involving wild game needs sideboards, an approach that might be considered “better” or “more intrusive” than federal regulations;
- Other?

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

In 2019 there are 20 federally inspected meatpacking plants and nearly twice that many state-inspected plants. Butte had four federally inspected plants and three state-inspected plants in 2018. The towns with two federally inspected plants include: Anaconda, Miles City, Ronan, and Sweet Grass.

Gary Hamel, who heads the Montana Meat and Poultry Inspection Bureau for the Department of Livestock, says the main emphasis on the Federal Meat Inspection Act, and its state counterpart, is to protect public health. The Executive Officer of the Department of Livestock, Mike Honeycutt, explains that if

Meat/Poultry Plants Licensed in Montana in 2019			
Federally Inspected	State Inspected	Custom Exempt	Meat Depots (storage sites)
20	35	120	146

butcher shops or inspectors during a routine operation suspect a problem in meat, such as a problem related to a federally managed and reportable disease like tuberculosis, they are to send a sample of the suspected tissue to the National Veterinary Services Laboratory operated by the U.S. Department of Agriculture’s Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service. The NVSL will culture the sample and determine whether further investigation is needed or if a quarantine needs to be ordered for ranches that may be the source of the suspected problem.

Also monitored by butcher shops and inspectors, Honeycutt said, in addition to checking for the potential spread of zoonotic disease to humans, are conditions that may lead to the spread of other harmful pathogens through meat products such as salmonella, listeria, campylobacter, and e. coli. The potential for the introduction of foreign material to meat products is also closely monitored. Honeycutt said such adulteration may lead to harmful effects to human health. Such conditions include but are not limited to pest infestations, unclean surfaces, improper humidity or moisture, rust, chipping paint, crumbling ceilings, and improper storage temperatures, to name a few.

In addition to determining sanitary conditions at slaughterhouses, the federal and state meat inspectors are observing whether the meat processing conforms to the standards set forth in each plant’s HACCP certification. HACCP stands for Hazard Analysis and Critical Control Points and may reflect such criteria as the heat to which a product must be exposed for a period of time to kill contaminants.

Other issues raised during HJ29 hearings included concerns about applications of laws to the custom exempt meat processing plants, different application of laws between individual and restaurant sales, and the appeals processes.

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