

DRAFT DOCUMENT UPDATED 5/12/2015

Jennifer Stephes

Meat Inspection Program, Minnesota Department of Agriculture

Summary:

- The MDA Meat Inspection Program was initiated in 1998 and has grown to a staff of around 26.
- A number of federal regulations and state regulations apply to meat inspection. The Meat Inspection Program at the MDA works to make this information accessible for meat processors and others they serve with outreach via fact sheets and other forms of communication.
- Some features of businesses that navigate the inspection process well are that they know what they want to manufacture and/or sell, have a planned facility location, and understand their end-user. Businesses often stay in business over many years when they're open to continuously innovating, renovating, adding new locations, and/or improving technology
- New businesses are also often more successful in navigating the process when they have a mentor. MDA can sometimes facilitate this connection to a mentor if there won't be issues of competition and they know of a business owner potentially interested.

Day-To-Day Job Experiences

Jennifer Stephes serves as one of three supervisors for the Minnesota State Meat Inspection Program within the Minnesota Department of Agriculture (MDA). Stephes was one of the first four inspectors in the Meat Inspection Program when she was hired the summer of 1999. The Meat Inspection Program started in 1998 to provide service to a number of State "Equal To" meat processors in Minnesota. Custom-exempt facilities were the primary model before this. As plants have grown and diversified in type, MDA has added more staff to be able to accommodate inspections at all of the new businesses. Within the Meat Inspection Program, there are 18 inspectors, two compliance officers, two support staff members, three supervisors, and the director.

By 2003, Stephes became the first Enforcement Investigation Analysis Officer (EIAO) for the program. In this role, she acted not as a supervisor, but as an auditor and identified potential problem areas in meat facilities; she worked with meat facility owners to help them strengthen their food safety systems involving their production processes. In 2006, Stephes was promoted into a supervisory role. She now is one of three supervisors within the program and currently supervises seven inspectors. Her other responsibilities include serving on the Achievement Award Committee within the MDA, the Local Foods Advisory Committee (LFAC), and a number of other outreach programs related to shell egg production. Minnesota has many small egg producers who are exempt from USDA rules because of their size. Stephes' outreach work helps to ensure that even small egg businesses know how to produce and sell clean, safe eggs.

DRAFT DOCUMENT UPDATED 5/12/2015

Stephes' work is guided by a number of regulations. MDA adopts Title 9 of the Code of Federal Regulations (CFR), which specifies meat and poultry rules (e.g. labeling, humane handling of livestock, sanitation plans, and custom exempt rules). Additionally, MDA uses the Federal Meat Inspection Act (FMIA) and the Poultry Products Inspection Act (PPIA), which were created through federal legislation. MDA also uses MN State Statutes 23 and 28A, which outline Minnesota-specific rules for meat and dairy.

Interactions with Establishments & Small Business Owners

One of Stephes' most rewarding experiences involved working with a tamale business owned by a family who had emigrated from Mexico to Minnesota. The family's business has grown from one restaurant into multiple restaurants and they now manufacture tamales as well. They sell made-from-scratch tamales hot in their restaurants, cold in grocery stores, and also at TCF Stadium at the University of Minnesota. Working with smaller entrepreneurs and assisting them through the regulatory process has been very rewarding for Stephes.

Factors That Make The Inspection Process Easier/Harder

From her perspective, formed by many years of inspection experience, Stephes believes that successful business owners are often ones who know what they are going to manufacture and/or sell, have a planned facility location, and understand who their end-user will be before working with their inspector. These business decisions make a difference on whether or not USDA must be involved in the inspection process and what local ordinances may apply. MDA meat inspectors give businesses a checklist at the beginning that shows what inspectors will look for, making sure to point out specific requirements such as septic systems and compliance with city ordinances.

It is also very helpful for business owners to have a connection to an already licensed, operating entrepreneur. This allows the new business owners to consult and learn from someone with direct experience. Sometimes MDA will facilitate that connection, but they have to be careful not to step into potential competition issues. The Minnesota Association of Meat Processors (MAMP) is also a great network and information-sharing resource for meat entrepreneurs. Additionally, it is advantageous for food entrepreneurs to be willing to work with inspectors and university staff, and to understand that the meat industry is a reactive environment - the pathogens and labeling requirements that have to be taken into consideration change over time as new strains of pathogens and labeling considerations evolve. Lastly, it is important for entrepreneurs to invest back into their businesses. From Stephes' perspective, the business owners who are successful achieve this success because they are continuously innovating, renovating, adding new locations, and/or using new and improving technology.

DRAFT DOCUMENT UPDATED 5/12/2015

The Minnesota State Meat Inspection Program inspectors all have full time positions. However, the workload is very geographically informed, and the number of facilities assigned to a given inspector depends on what part of the state the inspector works in. Inspectors in northern MN tend to have more drive time and fewer facilities, whereas inspectors in the Twin Cities tend to have less drive time and more facilities. Additionally, custom exempt facilities are only inspected once per quarter, whereas equal-to facility inspections require the inspector to be there during specific operational hours as well as requiring inspection staff to be present for the entire duration of the slaughter. Because of these time demands, the flexibility and availability of inspectors to work with entrepreneurs and answer phone calls and emails varies.

All inspectors must attend ongoing trainings and continuing education opportunities. To be promoted, inspectors must meet additional requirements such as receiving additional food safety training and accreditation. These factors ensure that inspectors are up-to-date on relevant information and any recent changes.

Tools/Resources that She Provides to Small Business Owners

The Minnesota State Meat Inspection Program has checklists, fact sheets, and resource links (such as USDA's Food Safety and Inspection Service (FSIS), the University, or the [Niche Meat Processor Assistance Network](#) (NMPAN)). Often meat inspectors will point business owners to these types of resources when they are interested in newer, innovative models that MDA is unfamiliar with. Additionally, the Meat Inspection Program has monthly and quarterly newsletters and information emails that are sent out. For example, the Monthly MN Meat Minute is emailed and mailed to all of the official State Equal-To plants. It is also shared with the Minnesota Association of Meat Processors (MAMP), and they include it in their monthly newsletters for their members (including custom, retail, Equal-To, and USDA plants). The Department provides these kinds of resources (resources that they are directly involved in creating or that have been posted on the MDA website) as reinforcement of USDA-FSIS informational efforts as well as to clarify information within a Minnesota context. Lastly, when a food entrepreneur comes up with a new, innovative business model, it needs to be substantiated with scientific support and needs to be evaluated by MDA staff to ensure it meets all applicable state statutes and federal regulations. Often, MDA meat inspection staff directs this kind of food entrepreneur to Universities or other process authorities for additional support and/or research.