

Local Food Advisory Committee

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Present:

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MDA Dairy & Meat Division Update

Jennifer Stepes and Lisa Wetzel

Poultry Processing

There is a poultry processing bottleneck for small flocks in the state. Large areas of the state do not have poultry processors, or inspectors – the facilities just aren't there. MDA gets contacted when people are doing things illegally and it's frustrating because MDA can't offer them legal options.

Poultry processing is hard work and it's difficult to be profitable year-round.

- Most small-flock poultry is seasonal and all coming ready at the same time.
- Processors need to have multiple enterprises in order to make it. There are a few year-round processors.
- Poultry processing is dirtier and more labor-intensive than red meat processing. It requires more people, but these may be seasonal temporary jobs.
- MDA has suggested to new start-up plants that they pursue poultry processing instead of or in addition to red meat, but mostly the plants have refused.

Red meat and poultry processing have to be separated in time and/or space. They have different needs and different organisms of concern.

- Poultry: Campylobacter and Salmonella
- Red meat: E. coli and STEC (Shiga toxin producing E. coli)
- Poultry testing requirements are costlier when bird volume is low.

Discussion of poultry processing options:

- Mobile slaughter & processing
 - Mobile unit would have to have its own water and waste disposal, or each farm would need approved water source and waste disposal.
 - Experiences elsewhere suggest this could only work with a dedicated group of farmers.
 - AGRI grants are available; any meat processor who submits an application is a shoo-in because the dearth of processing capacity is well known.
 - AGRI pays 25% of the cost
 - People can get multiple grants.
 - Example from NW MN: someone had purchased processing equipment and was going farm to farm to process birds for individuals' personal use. This was not a licensed operation, but it could have been if they were willing to have the right set-up.
- Custom-exempt processing
 - Some of the custom-exempt plants around the state do poultry slaughter. Farmers have to get the birds sold to individual customers prior to slaughter; then the customers are the owners of the birds.

- Custom-exempt processing doesn't have to meet the microbiological testing requirements.
- This is not an option for marketing poultry to schools, restaurants, etc. Sales can only be to individual end-consumers.
- PL-exempt processing
 - Farmers who are willing to do their own processing can do that on the farm with a PL-exempt facility. MDA inspects the facility.
 - Sales can only be to individual end-consumers, not any food businesses.
- Minnesota Equal-To processing
 - There are a limited number of plants available
 - Limited inspection capacity; MDA couldn't add any more Equal-To poultry plants right now.
 - Poultry pins down an inspector; they have to be there through the whole shift to look at every bird. With red meat, the inspector can be there for a couple of hours per day to look at animals slaughtered; then can go somewhere else.
- Prisoners as butchers?
 - The new program planned for NERCC (Northeast Regional Correctional Center) near Duluth is at a standstill.
 - Facility bids came in too high
 - Have to have a new facility in order to make the program work; the current facility was built in 1946.
 - Training is difficult. You have to match the level of curriculum with offender status.
 - Difficult for released prisoners to get jobs when they are on probation. For instance, Jack Link in Minong, WI would be willing to employ former prisoners, but people on probation couldn't cross into Wisconsin.
 - Need money for a staff person to do curriculum development and training. The current training available at NERCC is all focused on meat cutting, not employee skills or business management.

Legislative Proposals

- MDA is seeking revision of license fees to increase funding for inspection programs.
- MDA is submitting proposed clarifications of language in several parts of statute.

Regulators met with Grow North

Val Gamble

- MDA and MDH staff people met with Nichole Norby from Grow North to introduce her to what MDA and MDH do.
- Follow-up: MDA and MDH plan to list resources they think are important for beginning food entrepreneurs

Local Produce in Day-Care Centers

Grace Brogan, Renewing the Countryside

Day-care providers would like guidance about serving baby food made with fresh produce. Some would like to process and store produce on-site for use year-round.

- Canning with typical home-canning procedures is not an option. The requirements and potential for harm are too great.
 - Day care centers licensed as food establishments similar to restaurants, if properly equipped and trained, could do canning.
 - Most centers don't have the right equipment and set-up to do canning.
- Freezing would be easier. Once produce is frozen, it is stable if kept frozen. No regulatory concerns were mentioned concerning freezing.
- Home-based day-cares can feed children, but are not inspected by MDH. They are inspected by a local agency or by the Department of Human Services, but not MDH.
- Day care operators don't want to read through the general regulations for food businesses; they want a guide that is specific to them. They fear there are extra restrictions on them that would not apply to food facilities in general.
 - The real question may be whether it's okay for day cares to use local ingredients.
 - There are some concerns about toxicity: are there plant products that are unwise to give to very young children?
 - Avoid feeding the top high-risk vegetables in raw form.
 - "Baby-led weaning" involves offering very young children raw pieces of fruits or vegetables; you cannot assume that day cares will offer all produce in cooked and pureed form.
 - The MDA's fact sheet on approved sources of local produce could be helpful.
 - National Center for Home Food Preservation at the University of Georgia has a wide variety of tested recipes: <http://nchfp.uga.edu/>
 - U of MN Extension Food Safety for High-Risk Audiences courses are available and offer CEUs to day-care providers.
<http://www.extension.umn.edu/food/food-safety/courses/high-risk-audiences/>

Approved Source of Water

The Memorandum of Agreement between MDA and MDH on well inspection and approval is stalled out somewhere between the two agencies.

- The MOA would lay out a process for which agency would do which tasks, and when.
 - What gets tested for, and when?

- Who accepts and reviews the test results?
- MDH would not deputize MDA as a drinking water authority. MDH has primacy – legal authority under EPA to protect drinking water.

Example of a farm that had been allowing on-farm slaughter of animals by its customers. It is now working toward getting a license to allow that activity to proceed.

- Needs a safe water supply for washing utensils, spraying off carcasses, washing surfaces, etc.
- The farm met the requirements for a dairy 10 years ago, but well standards had changed during that time. The well might not be adequate for the new business model of on-farm slaughter.
- MDA's regulations say the water must be from an approved source, so cases like this get referred to MDH.
 - MDA does not have the expertise to do well inspections. All cases like this, coming from MDA, are handled by MDH on a case-by-case basis.

Determination of the type of water supply allowed and the water testing schedule for rural food processing facilities goes by the population of workers in the facility. The threshold for requiring public water supply is the same as for food establishments serving food: water must come from a public water supply if the minimum threshold of 25 people present in the facility on 60 days per year is crossed.

- Rural processing facilities could be churning out many pounds of food and still not be required to use a public water supply, due to small number of employees.
- It's common for water bottling facilities to have limited tested of their water due to the small number of employees.

Local Food Donations to Food Shelves

The MDH has a document about allowed types of foods for donation to food shelves. This is an old document, and the language of it is not encouraging to donations of local food.

- Lots of other organizations link to it, including the USDA.
- Part of it consists of PDF versions of outdated fact sheets.
- Some addresses provided in it are out of date.
- It's not technically wrong because it follows the Food Code, which has not been updated in Minnesota since 1995.
- MDH has no capacity to revise it at this time.

Lots of Minnesota organizations involved with food access issues are using some local produce.

- Open Arms of MN is working with The Food Group on local gleaning projects, receiving some local product and making soups from it.
- Hunger Solutions is working on more farm-to-table pathways.
- A U of MN student wants to form a food system group on campus that would include local food and food access.

- There's a food shelf on the St. Paul Campus of the U of MN.

There are anecdotes of difficulty for farmers wanting to donate local product; some food shelves and food banks think they can't accept it.

The MDH's document was written in haste about 15 years ago in response to an issue, which may have been donations of wild game to food shelves. It was suggested that it be taken down now that it is so outdated and is sometimes a barrier for donation of local food, but that solution is not satisfactory because it is the only thing like it in the country and many organizations link to it.

U of MN Extension recently published a "Building Better Food Shelves" website section that includes some information about local food. Tim Jenkins and Hannah Jastram worked on that; Jane Jewett will check whether they have some capacity to revise the MDH's document.

Grant Applications Submitted

The Regional Sustainable Development Partnerships (RSDPs) submitted a Healthy Foods Healthy Lives proposal for a project to replicate the Wabasha Farmers' Market. Renewing the Countryside will submit a similar proposal to other funders.

The RSDPs also submitted a large AFRI (Agriculture & Food Research Initiative) grant proposal to look at backhauling of farmers' produce by distributors delivering to rural grocery stores.

Renewing the Countryside submitted a USDA Farm to School proposal to do review of Farm to School toolkits and training at five regional events.

Innovation Group in MDA

An informal group of people connected to LFAC and/or the Bush Grant project has been meeting for about four months to hone their ideas about an "innovation group" within MDA to deal with difficult licensing cases.

Currently a group of higher-level MDA staff are receiving informal referral of complicated cases from inspectors. They discuss situations, agree on points of law, and send an email back out to inspectors. They also deal with questions that bubble up from LFAC or other sources. The LFAC folks want to formalize this process so that it can continue to operate even if MDA staff people involved are re-assigned, move on, or retire.

Cecilia Coulter put together some descriptive documents, but we need to work those down into a really solid, brief proposal.

- The Innovation Group needs to include regulators, for ability to issue authoritative statements; and non-regulators, for perspective on issues faced by food entrepreneurs.

- Difficult to have funding through MDA for a group that would get into all kinds of non-regulatory topics like insurance, business planning, etc.
- Better as a within-MDA group that could take referrals from entrepreneurs and advocacy groups.
 - What about a vetting system?
 - Would it allow self-referral by entrepreneurs?
 - What criteria for referral?
- Questions about the overall structure and legal authority:
 - This could be considered an appeal; MDA could establish it as an appeal process
 - Statutory change needed? An appeal process requirement would provide legal authority.
 - Could be established as a subset of Food Safety & Defense Task Force
- When would the group's activities be triggered?
 - Need a decision tree to direct people to correct regulator
 - Not always clear whether an applicant is retail or wholesale
 - Have a checklist of what is needed for business licensing
 - NOTED that the decision tree and checklist are already under development at MDA.
- How would this group create systemic improvement and justify its existence?
 - "Smart Process" – use the outlier cases that come before the group to improve the whole system
 - Improve efficiency of dealing with difficult licensing cases, because there's an established process to do that.
 - Improve health equity: better access to licensing for innovative food businesses that serve minority communities
- What if there's a fiscal note? We need data:
 - Burden on small business to face delays or denials of licensing
 - Efficiency of licensing system
 - Any information on who drops out of pursuit of licensing, and why – these are food businesses not started and therefore not contributing to economy
 - MDA is starting to track how many initial contacts they receive vs. how many licenses issued
 - Comparison of level of small business start-up support in other, similar metro areas and comparison of number of start-up businesses per year
 - Look at Colorado
- How would this Innovation Group and system be implemented?
 - Ask for 3 FTEs to create this in MDA (Noted that this is a tough ask in current legislature)
 - City of Mpls experience showed value of consultant/coordinator to push it forward
- How to let people know this group exists?
 - Education of farmers and entrepreneurs by community groups
 - Information given directly to inspectors to let them and applicants know about it
 - Outreach and training directed at the food entrepreneur community
 - Grow North and Midwest Pantry do this kind of training
 - Outreach at the State Fair

LFAC people involved in this discussion will pull together a follow-up meeting in January.

Next LFAC meeting: March of 2017