

FSIS Measures Worry Meat Processors

by [Zach Mallove](#) | Apr 18, 2010

Late last year, Deputy Agriculture Secretary Kathleen Merrigan, in the first ever live Facebook chat between the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) and the public, assured small meat processors and meat lockers that her agency would be sensitive to their concerns in crafting the details of food safety regulation. But, she said, "no one is exempt from food safety."



As indicated, the USDA recently issued a draft guidance seeking to aid small plants in meeting food safety requirements. Specifically, the regulation is designed to clarify Pathogen Reduction: Hazard Analysis and Critical Control Point (HAACP), a regulatory system published by the Food Safety and Inspection Service (FSIS) in 1996.

The USDA says the new rules are needed to ensure that meat handlers are keeping dangerous bacteria out of their products. In a recent letter to the industry, the USDA said that a "demonstrated failure" by processors to ensure they had proper safety measures had led to a series of recalls involving pork barbecue, sausages and other products.

But small farmers claim new fees and inspection requirements would impose ruinous financial burdens that could cause businesses to drop products or go out of business.

Some experts agree. John Ikerd, emeritus professor of agricultural economics at the University of Missouri, Columbia, said the bill's impact on smaller producers "could be a blow to the whole local food movement," running contrary to the Obama administration's campaign to promote locally grown foods and small producers.

A trade association that represents small plants, the American Association of Meat Processors, estimated the initial costs at as much as \$12,000 per product line and then \$3,600 per year.

Paul Bubeck, who runs a small business that sells smoked products to supermarkets, said the USDA proposal could cost him hundreds of thousands of dollars.

"I can't believe we have to fight the government to stay in business," he said.

At issue are the safety rules that processors have to follow to ensure they are taking proper measures to prevent contaminated meat from reaching consumers. According to some estimates, processors might have to start testing meat before and after it is treated with cleansing acid washes, heating measures, or any other steps taken to kill harmful bacteria. In some cases, 13 samples of a product would be tested at each time.

This process could be especially costly for small producers because they often produce specialty meats or many different types and styles. Testing for a large cattle slaughterhouse, conversely, would be simpler and more cost-efficient, given that it might just produce one line of beef carcasses.

Not surprisingly, big food companies generally support the measures, judging that added expenses would be small compared to the potential financial damage of a vast product recall or outbreak. For this reason, food safety regulation has often been blamed for the shrinking number of small meat processors and the concentration of market power in industry giants like Tyson Foods and Smithfield Foods.

"Anytime you increase regulation you increase costs and you concentrate an industry," said Iowa Agriculture Secretary Bill Northey. "This is a perfect example of how that can happen."

The USDA, however, agreed to look into the complaints and is currently taking comments from the industry and the public.

Deputy Agriculture Secretary Kathleen Merrigan, who is spearheading the local food initiative, said the cost estimates being used by opponents of the bill are overblown, but that she'll be discussing the issue soon with officials from the Food Safety and Inspection Service (FSIS).

Although Merrigan said that organic farmers and small businesses need rules that are "transparent, strict, and rigorously enforced," the USDA doesn't want to harm small-scale meat processors.

"I don't think we're on a collision course," she said