

Meat Processors Worried Over Proposed Safety Rules

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Washington, D.C. — Federal regulators are proposing new meat testing requirements that small processors say would impose staggering new costs and force businesses to drop products or go out of business.

The U.S. Agriculture Department says the new rules are needed to ensure that meat lockers 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.

The rules affect any processor who sells meat to the public, either in its own store, to restaurants or grocery stores. The rules do not affect custom butchers who slaughter and process for a customer.

The proposed rules risk running afoul of the Obama administration's campaign to promote locally grown foods and small producers. Small-scale processors represent a tiny slice of total meat sales, but they see growing demand from consumers, chefs and grocers for locally produced meats and other foods.

"You can regulate somebody to the point that they can't operate anymore," said Phil Barber, who sells beef, pork and chicken to restaurants, country clubs and other businesses in the Des Moines area.

Industry experts say it is not clear yet how extensive the testing will have to be. But a trade association that represents small plants, the American Association of Meat Processors, estimated the initial cost could be as much as \$12,000 per product line and then \$3,600 a year.

Lewright Meats Inc., an Eagle Grove, Ia., processor, sells more than 35 products that could be affected, the company said.

Food-safety regulations have often been blamed for the shrinking number of processors in the country and growing market power of the packing giants such as Tyson Foods and Smithfield Foods that now dominate the industry. The USDA and the Justice Department launched a series of hearings this year to look into concentration across agribusiness, including meatpacking.

"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."



Phil Barber says his Brewer Wholesale Meat Co. already has to comply with this thick binder of federal regulations. The government is regulating us out of business," he says.

At issue are the rules that processors have to follow to ensure that they are taking the proper measures to prevent contaminated meat from reaching consumers.

Under the rules, called draft guidance, issued by the USDA's Food Safety and Inspection Service, processors may have to start testing meat before and after it is treated with acid washes, heating or other measures to ensure that any harmful bacteria are removed. At least 13 samples of a product would be tested each time.

Depending on how widely the testing has to be done, it could be especially costly for small processors because they often produce a variety of items from several different kinds of meat, said Arion Thiboumery of Iowa State University, who helps coordinate a national network of Extension agents, organizations and government agencies that assists small processors.

One issue that's not clear is whether, for example, a bratwurst with cheese and plain bratwurst would be considered separate products and subject to separate testing, he said. Testing for a large cattle slaughterhouse could be simpler, given that it may produce just one product, beef carcasses.

Now, processors say the meat is assumed to be safe when they perform their treatment measures correctly, such as monitoring the temperatures in smokehouses.

Paul Bubeck, who runs Lewright Meats, a fourth-generation business that sells smoked products to Hy-Vee and Dahl's supermarkets, said he does some testing for listeria and E. coli. But he said the USDA proposal could cost him hundreds of thousands of dollars, based on a preliminary estimate.

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

A consumer advocate agreed with the USDA that processors and meat inspectors are confused about what companies are required to be doing. That inconsistency itself has been making it hard for small companies to stay in business, said Felicia Nestor, a policy analyst for Food and Water Watch.

But she said the proposed rules are not entirely clear as to what testing processors would have to do.

Meat trade associations also say it is not clear how extensive testing would have to be. "It's fair to say it created a great deal of questions," Jim Hodges, president of the American Meat Institute Foundation, said of the USDA proposal. The foundation is the research arm of an association whose members include Tyson, Smithfield and other large packers.

The USDA Food Safety and Inspection Service is taking comments from the industry and public. A spokesman for the service declined to answer questions about the proposal, citing the comment period. Gary Johnson, chief of Iowa's meat inspection bureau, said the rules could force some processors to scale back to the detriment of livestock producers, farmers markets and others. Some could decide just to do custom processing for individuals rather than selling to consumers, he said.

Meat processors can be inspected either by the Food Safety and Inspection Service or by the state agency, but they still must follow the USDA regulations.

There are 71 state-inspected Iowa plants that would be affected by the testing requirements, Johnson said.