



New Meat Rules Could Mean Fewer Processors, Higher Prices

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The comment period on a proposed clarification of standards affecting meat processors has been extended to June 19.

The USDA's Food Safety and Inspection Service (FSIS) is considering a set of revisions to the Hazard Analysis Critical Control Points (HACCP) program, of which the public comment period was originally supposed to expire on Tuesday.

But pressure from industry trade groups has led the government to extend the comment period an additional two months.

The proposed revisions, which Jay Wenther, executive director of the American Association of Meat Processors, described as "widely vague and widely interpretable," could hit smaller meat processors hard because it would require them to spend more money on additional testing on things that have been done for years under the existing HACCP system.

"This is going to be a severe financial burden," Wenther said.

Custom butchers would likely be exempt.

The association has estimated that it will cost as much as \$12,000 for the initial testing and perhaps as much as \$3,600 for each year after, depending on the product line being tested.

In its "Draft Guidance: HACCP Systems Validation," FSIS sites the need to clarify the "validation" portion of HACCP.

HACCP, which is mandatory for the meat, poultry, seafood and juice industries, is a process used to identify areas in which foodborne illness can be prevented using scientifically proven sanitary practices. It was introduced in 1996.

In the draft guidance, FSIS states the need to clarify validation procedures is necessary because of "widespread lack of understanding of validation that FSIS had found .700among establishments" and "because of food safety problems that have occurred as a result."

Depending on the product being produced, each one has its own HACCP standard to account for differences.

For example, a processor would have different HACCP plans for slaughtering beef or chicken.

Under the draft guidance, as many as 13 samples of raw meat from each product line would have to be checked for levels of bacteria and other potential sources of foodborne illness.

Along with that, additional samples, as many as 13 more, would have to be sent out for testing after the product is processed into its ready-to-sell form. That would mean a total of 26 tests.

This is where small processors, which often produce a variety of products, could be greatly impacted, according to Wenther.

He questioned the reasoning for the revisions and the government's claim that it is based on food safety issues.

"Consistently, the only answers we've been given is the agency believes they have information through food safety assessments or potential recalls that the entire industry needs to stop and do this," he said. "They've been very, very vague about that."

Wenther's organization, along with eight other industry groups, has sent letters urging FSIS to reconsider the changes.

Iowa's Secretary of Agriculture Bill Northey sent a letter recently to USDA Secretary Tom Vilsack expressing concern over the changes.

The Ranchers-Cattlemen Action Legal Fund, United Stockgrowers of America (R-CALF USA) also sent a letter to Vilsack, challenging the revisions.

Local processors are worried about how the changes could impact their businesses.

Michael Smucker of Smucker's Meats in Mount Joy, Pa., said the changes would likely force the business to drop product lines and raise prices.

The average processing bill, which for beef is between \$300 and \$400, would likely go up between \$100 and \$200 per head, he said.

"The farmers that we work for are depending on us to process the meat for them to sell it," Smucker said. "If the processing costs are too high, they can't sell it. They would have to send it out to auction or do something else."

Ron Fouche of Seltzer's Smokehouse Meats in Palmyra, Pa., said the revisions would not cause as great of an impact to his business because it sells only one product.

But he is not clear as to what the government actually wants.

"I hope brains are attached to their heads down there in Washington," Fouche said. "I'm confused by it. What are they looking for. In my opinion, what they put together is rather vague."

Brian Snyder, executive director of the Pennsylvania Association for Sustainable Agriculture (PASA), said the revisions are another example of a broken system hurting small operators.

"We're very concerned about it. They are tuning up food safety all across the board and whenever that happens, it always seems to hurt the small operators," he said. "There is no secret that this is in the interest of larger players."

Wenther said large operators would have to abide by the same rules.

In fact, in the revisions, it states that larger processors would have to provide samples consistent with their level of production.

Whatever the impact, Wenther said the revisions contradict the USDA's push for more locally produced foods.

"I think overall, you'll see the whole "know your food, know your farmer" thing hurting them, because (farmers) will not have the place to take their products. More of these small processors will go out of business," he said. "It will be harder and harder for these producers to find plants where they can direct-market their products."