



Support SB 691 - Help Small Farmers & Improve Consumers' Access to Locally Raised Meat

The COVID-19 pandemic revealed the fragility of our centralized, consolidated food system. Grocery store shelves were empty and some large farms had to destroy or leave their food to rot, while food bank lines kept growing. In contrast, small farms were able to respond quickly to the crisis and keep feeding their communities. But even now, three years later, local farmers continue to struggle with regulations that are written for the mass-scale operations – in particular, the regulations governing meat processing.

Under the Federal Meat Inspection Act (FMIA), meat from cattle, hogs, goats, sheep, and poultry can only be sold if they are processed in a facility deemed an “inspected slaughterhouse.” Even state-inspected slaughterhouses must meet the exact same standards as USDA-inspected plants. These include having a Hazard Analysis Critical Control Point (HACCP) plan and requiring an inspector on-site at all times during the processing. The costs and regulatory barriers for inspected slaughterhouses have resulted in too few to meet the needs of many small farmers in Texas.

This situation was already a problem pre-COVID, and due to the closure and slowdowns at many large-scale meatpackers, it is now a crisis: Texas farmers in some parts of the state are unable to get a slot to process their livestock at an inspected slaughterhouse for close to a year. They must somehow find a way to feed and care for their animals without being able to sell the meat for income.

There are approximately 100 facilities deemed “custom slaughterhouses” in Texas, which are often closer and more accessible for small farmers. These facilities must meet federal standards and are licensed and inspected by the Texas Department of State Health Services (DSHS). They do not, however, need to have an approved HACCP or have an inspector on-site during processing.

Under the FMIA, the meat from custom slaughterhouses cannot legally be sold, but can only be used for personal or household consumption by the person(s) who owned the animal at the time of processing. As a result, they primarily process meat for hunters and homesteaders. Farmers can sell a live animal to individuals, then have it processed at a custom slaughterhouse, and the meat is then distributed to the animal’s owners. But this requires that the individuals buy $\frac{1}{2}$ or $\frac{1}{4}$ of a cow at a time, which can be cost-prohibitive for many consumers.

SB 691 by Senator Kolkhorst mirrors the laws in Wyoming, Nebraska, and Colorado that allow people to purchase shares of an animal in any quantity. The animals can be processed in custom slaughterhouses, and then the share owners can obtain meat in whatever quantities they and the farmer have agreed upon. This solution is consistent with the FMIA, while still allowing small farmers to more easily use custom slaughterhouses for their products. This will make selling meat more feasible and profitable for smaller-scale producers, encouraging more farmers to produce meat

for their local communities. This in turn will make locally raised meat more accessible and affordable for Texans.

For more information, contact Judith McGeary, Executive Director, Farm and Ranch Freedom Alliance, Judith@FarmAndRanchFreedom.org, 512-484-8821 (cell).

What about food safety?

- **Custom slaughterhouses are already operating safely across Texas.**
 - Texas DSHS inspects custom slaughterhouses, but the inspector does not need to be present during processing. **This is analogous to the way *most* food in this country is regulated** (i.e. subject to standards and inspection, but the inspector isn't there at all times).
 - Approximately 100 custom slaughterhouses are licensed in Texas. In response to a verbal inquiry, DSHS staff said that they did not know of any foodborne illnesses traced to a custom slaughterhouse in over a decade. (We have filed an Open Records Act request to confirm.)
 - Nationwide, USDA has stated that it has no records of any foodborne illnesses resulting from meat processed at any custom slaughterhouse in the country in the last eight years.¹
- **Local, small-scale distribution provides transparency and accountability.**
 - The bill only allows distribution of meat to people who have chosen to buy “herd shares” in a specific farm.
 - Contrast that with the conventional system, in which a single slaughterhouse may process thousands of animals per day and ship meat all over the country under numerous different labels and via complex distribution chains.

Is this just about COVID?

- Long before COVID, small farmers urged reforms to meat processing regulations because of the need for more small-scale processors in order to diversify and re-localize our food system.
- COVID has revealed the pre-existing problems with the conventional meat supply:
 - Massive slaughterhouses process animals at high speed under dangerous and unsanitary conditions.
 - A handful of operations process a large percentage of the nation's meat supply on a “just in time” model that is vulnerable to any disruption.
 - Many farmers have only one potential buyer, so that if the plant closes or even just slows, they have nowhere to go with their animals.

¹ USDA, FOIA response, 2020-FSIS_00397-F (June 25, 2020)

- While there is no “silver bullet,” this bill is an important step to expand access to safe, small-scale processors and build a more resilient food system.