

Oregon Bills Support Locally Grown Poultry

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Supporters of small family farms and locally grown food in Oregon are backing three bills--the Farm Direct Bill, the Family Farm Act, and HB 2872--that address poultry processing. (The matter is also covered in the omnibus Family Farm Act, HB 2222, which seeks to expand limits on raw milk production, among other provisions.)

"In Oregon the only way for you to legally sell a processed chicken is to have it processed in your own state-inspected facility, which you have to build to specs and is allowed under the 20,000-bird exemption, which is part of federal law," said Kendra Kimbirauskas, president of Friends of Family Farmers, a statewide organization.

"That facility could cost up to 100K, (according to) some producers that we've talked to in the state that have actually gone ahead and done this. Or you can process your birds in a USDA facility," she explained, adding that there is only one USDA facility in Oregon, and it just came online in the last few months.

Trying to understand the lace of federal regulations regarding poultry slaughter is not simple, but a glance at the industry's history offers some perspective.

In the early 20th century, consumers processed their own birds, whether they raised the animals themselves or bought them live. In the 1930s, the custom of selling birds "New York dressed" arose, which meant that the birds were bled and feathered. In the years following World War II, demand for ready-to-cook birds vastly expanded the poultry industry.

Congress first introduced federal legislation on poultry processing in 1957 as the Wholesome Poultry Products Act. Also known The Poultry Products Inspection Act, the law provided standards for USDA continuous bird-by-bird inspection to ensure that chickens were handled safely en route to interstate or foreign commerce. Amendments in 1967 and 1968 set rules for handling poultry bound for customers within a state, and established a number of exemptions from the daily federal inspection that was initially required.

Among these exemptions is the 20,000 bird limit, which Oregon currently follows. The number refers to the amount of birds a single grower can process in one calendar year; processing must take place in a state-inspected, brick-and-mortar facility owned by the producer/grower.

The proposed legislation seeks to align Oregon with another exemption that allows producer/growers to process up to one thousand birds per calendar year. The processing must be done on farm, and the poultry must be sold on farm.

"These bills are nearly identical and provide for small grower/producers to raise no more than 1,000 poultry -- chickens, turkeys, ducks, geese, and guineas -- for slaughter and intrastate sale without being licensed or inspected," said Jim Postlewait of the Oregon Department of Agriculture's Food Safety Division. "The poultry grower must slaughter and store poultry while protecting from adulteration (such as) dust, insects, etc."

Many states currently allow poultry growers to use this exemption, but nothing makes dressing a chicken, let alone hundreds of chickens, simple or easy. Farmers have various solutions to this problem, including hiring help for slaughter days, and building or purchasing equipment, new or used, to simplify the many tasks involved. In efforts to make processing possible for smaller scale poultry farms, mobile slaughter and processing facilities, also known as MSUs, have been developed and are in use.

"MSUs for poultry tend to be used by farmers operating under the 20,000 bird limit," said Lauren Gwin, co-coordinator of the Niche Meat Processor Assistant Network. "Federal law allows the MSU to be used

by a set of farmers, each of whom does up to 20K birds per year, as long as each farmer does this on his/her own farm and follows all the other rules of that exemption."

One such model was built in 2001 in Kentucky, a state that does not allow the federal exemption that Oregon is seeking. The MSU is run by Kentucky State University and can process up to 400 birds in a day. The mobile unit is not entirely mobile as it must be docked at a station to handle poultry, because of wastewater and other sanitary considerations. The unit can also process aquaculture onsite where the fish are grown.

The result of a joint project of Heifer International, Kentucky State University, Partners for Family Farms and the National Center for Appropriate Technology, this MSU was partially funded by a USDA SARE (Sustainable Agriculture Research and Education) grant.

In other states, MSUs and MPPU (mobile poultry processing units) are truly mobile, available for rental for farms to use on site, with or without the guiding labor of a skilled processor. The facilities are owned by a variety of private and public groups, and subject to either state or federal inspection.

Some mobile processing units are aimed at farmers who operate under the thousand-bird exemption, such as one built and used in south central New York State. This model facility is meant to be used for one year as farmers gear up to build their own units.

In all of these instances, educational materials on safe processing in general and safe processing within a mobile slaughter environment are often provided through extension agencies, in the form of guides, webinars, and live classes.

A group that offers such services and serves small and mid-sized meat and poultry processors is the aforementioned national Niche Meat Processor Assistance Network (NMPAN). Lauren Gwin and colleague Garry Stephenson are among the professionals in support of the legislation in Oregon.

"If the bill becomes law, there will be no formal inspection of farmers operating under this exemption," said Gwin, who is also on the faculty Oregon State University in a research and extension appointment.

"However, they still have to follow the USDA basic rules, as written in the bill and explained in our letter. And USDA can pop in at any time, for example, if there is a complaint to make sure that the farmer isn't breaking those rules, e.g. doing 2,000 birds/year, not keeping sales records, or creating an unsanitary cesspool of blood & feathers."