

A Hometown Harvest

State Meat Inspection Program Preserves Local Option for Consumers, Producers

Every Saturday from March through October, shoppers at the Columbia Farmers' Market line up to purchase pork chops, roasts, ribs, bacon and other products from Jim and Deanna Crocker of Centralia. Halfway across the state, upscale St. Louis restaurants feature beef, pork, lamb and poultry produced by Greenwood Farm of Newburg. At a Mennonite country store near Versailles, the freezer is stocked with meat bearing the name of a local farmer and a seal of approval from the Missouri Department of Agriculture.

Every consumer is familiar with USDA meat inspection. It's been the assurance of quality at grocery stores as long as most Americans can remember. Perhaps less understood is a parallel system of meat inspection operated by the Missouri Department of Agriculture. The state Meat and Poultry Inspection Program monitors production at facilities that produce meat for sale exclusively within the boundaries of Missouri and certifies that plants processing meat for private consumption are clean and safe.

"The state meat inspection program doesn't get a lot of attention, but it's a critical link in the chain that connects local producers and local consumers," says Director of Agriculture Dr. Jon Hagler. "When people purchase meat that was raised locally, the chances are very good that this Department provided the inspection services to assure safety and quality. In a very real way, the shortest distance between pasture and dinner plate often passes through a state-inspected processing facility."

Inspection is the key to putting meat on the grill. No meat can be sold to consumers in America unless an official inspector – either state or federal – is present at the time of harvest. Current federal regulations require USDA inspection for any meat sold across state lines. State inspection programs – which must be equal to or better than federal standards – supervise facilities that supply meat to local markets.

Ten Department of Agriculture inspectors travel the state, visiting 27 state-licensed meat processing plants and three poultry facilities to ensure that the food they produce meets USDA standards as "wholesome, unadulterated and properly labeled." Inspectors observe livestock handling to confirm that animals are treated humanely. They monitor harvest procedures to make sure all regulations are followed and examine carcasses for any signs of disease. In addition, the Department's inspectors review the sanitation, labeling and food safety practices of retail stores that repackage federally inspected meat and 137 "custom exempt" facilities that process animals for personal consumption.

With regard to quality and food safety, meat inspected by Missouri officials is identical to USDA-inspected products, but state oversight offers local processing plants more than just a seal of approval. USDA regulations often intimidate small business owners, especially those first entering the commercial meat mar-

ket. Drafting the consumer labels and food processing instructions required by the federal government's HACCP, or Hazard Analysis Critical Control Point, law can be as daunting as the law's name. Missouri's meat and poultry inspectors offer guidance and advice that helps processors make sense of these complex rules.

"We're much more hands-on than the federal inspectors," says Dr. Harold Treese, who heads the Meat and Poultry Inspection Program for the state Agriculture Department. "We assist these plants and work to get them ready for inspection. We do everything we can to help them meet the needs of Missouri's agricultural producers."

By helping processors comply with USDA standards, the state inspection program encourages the continued success of local businesses that serve the needs of low-volume and specialty livestock producers. State-inspected plants are typically smaller than federal plants and often provide custom services that allow producers to develop particular cuts and offer unique products to satisfy consumers' increasing appetite for locally produced foods.

"These small state-inspected plants give the consumer another option when buying meat and provide a convenience for the producer," says Scott Heintz, owner of Heintz Processing, a state-licensed plant in Cuba, MO, and president of the Missouri Association of Meat Producers. "State inspection allows them to fill a niche market, selling at the local farmers' market or in restaurants."

One such specialized producer is the Atkinson family of Newburg, which markets meat under the Greenwood Farm label. The family once used a USDA-inspected plant, but now has its beef, pork and lamb processed by The Butcher Shop, a state-inspected facility located in Vienna. The Atkinsons think so highly of state inspection as a critical aspect of local foods, the family touts The Butcher Shop on its website and while visiting with customers at the Tower Grove Farmers' Market in St. Louis. "Consumers like to have a sense of where their food comes from. They like supporting people in their area," says Julie Atkinson.

State-inspected plants have provided locally raised and processed meats long before urban bistros began promoting Missouri farms on their menus, though. Small, often rural, processing plants have supplied the dinner tables of area residents for generations. When the local FFA club holds a fundraiser barbecue, it often serves pork donated by a local producer and processed at a state-inspected plant. Elk and bison ranchers rely on state-inspection so they can sell their products. When a family farm decides to diversify by marketing jerky or other meat snacks, they often take their recipe to a state-inspected plant.

Whether they raise livestock for a living or simply have a taste for locally produced food, Missourians are accustomed to choices when it comes to meat. Surprisingly, not all consumers and producers are as fortunate. Just 27 states offer inspection services as an alternative to the federal system. Producers in many states struggle to find processing services. In fact, the *New York Times* recently highlighted a shortage of processing facilities on the East Coast and said that some ranchers there must wait up to a year to bring their animals to local slaughterhouses. Nationwide, there are less than two dozen state-inspected poultry plants, including the three in Missouri.

The relative ease that Missouri consumers have finding meat raised by local farmers is testament to the Department of Agriculture's mission of supporting all levels of food production, regardless of size or intended market, officials say.

"Consumers want choices when they buy food, and we're here to make sure they have as many choices as possible," says Agriculture Director Hagler. "Some shoppers like the convenience and affordability their local grocery store provides. Other consumers want to look their food producer in the eye at the farmers' market or keep jobs in their community by supporting a local meat processor. Fortunately, Missouri's agricultural industry is diverse enough to provide the options that consumers demand."

While state inspection and local processing provides options at the meat counter, a vibrant meat production industry also means more opportunities at the barnyard gate. Most of the 7 million cattle and hogs raised in Missouri each year are sold before they're ready for harvest, but many producers prefer to finish their animals themselves and take them to local processors in hopes of a greater return on investment. State-inspected plants help make that choice possible.

"These local plants make a big difference in the livelihood of a lot of producers," Treese says. "Having their meat inspected locally allows producers to keep their product under their own label. That adds value to the animals they raise."

Mid-Missouri pork producers Jim and Deanna Crocker insist that they would have given up raising hogs years ago if it were not for the direct-to-consumer marketing that local processing and state inspection allows.

"We would not be in business if he had not changed the way we sell our pork," says Jim Crocker, president of Boone County Pork Producers, a local producers group. "By going to the farmers' market, we can control our price from start to finish."

The Crockers rely on the services of Davis Processing, a small state-inspected facility in Jonesburg. The facility, a member of the AgriMissouri program, provides more than 30 cuts of packaged pork products for the Crockers, including four types of bratwurst and hot dogs free of added nitrates. “We wouldn’t be able to survive without them,” Deanna Crocker says of their state-inspected processor.

With more than 50,000 head of cattle and hogs moving through Missouri every week, the animals processed under state inspection represents just a small part of the state’s livestock industry. It’s an important part, though. The choices made possible by local processing and state inspection add a great deal of diversity and opportunity for consumers and producers.

The familiar outline of the state of Missouri with the legend “MO INSP & PSD” on a meat label is the consumer’s assurance that state inspectors were on hand when the meat was processed. The Missouri Inspected and Passed label is more than just a guarantee of safety and wholesomeness, though. It’s a reminder of the strength and diversity of Missouri’s meat industry

“State inspection helps fill an important niche in Missouri’s beef, pork and poultry market,” says Director of Agriculture Hagler. “From the vendor stalls of farmers’ markets to the church sausage supper to the linen-covered tablecloths of restaurants that promote local foods, state inspection adds to the bounty of Missouri’s dinner table and makes the state a better place to raise animals and buy food.”

For more information about Missouri’s Meat and Poultry Inspection Program (including a list of state-inspected plants), log on to mda.mo.gov.