

OFFICE OF THE GOVERNOR  
STATE OF MONTANA

Steve Bullock  
GOVERNOR



Mike Cooney  
LT. GOVERNOR

**FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE:**

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**Governor Bullock Presses USDA to Allow Locally Produced Meat to Go to Montanans Hardest Hit by COVID-19 Pandemic**

MONTANA – Governor Steve Bullock sent a letter U.S. Department of Agriculture Secretary Sonny Perdue to allow some local processing in order to avoid food waste and get local meat to Montana food banks for Montanans hardest hit by the impacts of COVID-19.

The USDA recently denied a request by the Montana Department of Livestock to consider modified protocols that would allow selected processors to process some local demand from Montana producers and farmers, instead of continuing to require that product be processed at facilities that are increasingly reaching capacity.

**“I believe the request by our state meat inspection authorities is a reasonable step that should be approved,”** Governor Bullock wrote in the letter. **“Our proposed protocols would enforce the intent of our food safety regulations and ensure that food is not wasted at a time when many Montanans need access to food during this crisis.”**

Allowing custom processing under USDA modified guidance would cut down on food waste and allow Montana-produced food to go to local food banks, getting local meat and food to families hardest hit by the impacts of COVID-19.

Governor Bullock also asked the USDA to encourage new ideas to reduce barriers for Montana meat processing capacity and improve markets for rural producers in Montana over the long term.

The full letter to USDA Secretary Perdue is attached.

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OFFICE OF THE GOVERNOR  
STATE OF MONTANA

STEVE BULLOCK  
GOVERNOR



MIKE COONEY  
LT. GOVERNOR

April 24, 2020

Secretary Sonny Perdue  
U.S. Department of Agriculture  
1400 Independence Ave. SW  
Washington, DC 20250

Dear Secretary Perdue:

The recent public health crisis related to COVID-19 and the necessary responses to mitigate that crisis have put great strain on rural economies. As you are aware, one of the sectors that has been hit the hardest by these measures is agriculture and food production. Markets that were already fundamentally weak have been sent into a tailspin by the loss of demand associated with proper social distancing orders. Further, the appearance of COVID clusters within the food processing community have necessitated the closure of major facilities around the country leading to major disruption in traditional supply chains and leaving many livestock producers with limited avenues to effectively market their products. Unfortunately, the result has been that safe, nutritious, and wholesome protein products have been dumped and the industry is potentially facing the culling of live animals.

It does not stand to reason that this food should go to waste when there are so many families who are in desperate need of access to this nutrition to sustain them through the economic fallout of a global pandemic. It is time to look at temporary and measured steps to ensure this product can get to food banks and other organizations providing relief to our citizens in need while maintaining the standard of food safety that has made our food system the envy of many in the world.

In Montana we do not have a large meat packing facility and there already exists a bottleneck in capacity of the fully state and federal inspected small establishments to meet our needs. Therefore, much of our livestock is marketed out of state to large feedlots and large-scale industrial packing houses. Now that those supply chains and markets have been disrupted, our famers and ranchers are looking for ways to get their product in to the hands of local food banks to meet the needs of those hardest hit by the economic fallout of our war on COVID-19.

It has come to my attention that in many cases this is not possible as the product must be processed in facilities under full inspection by USDA or our the Montana Department of Livestock and those facilities are reaching their capacity to be able to handle the increased demand for their services. Because of this growing concern the Montana Department of Livestock recently asked the USDA Food Safety Inspection Service to consider a modified protocol that with the onsite guidance of our state meat inspectors would allow selected custom exempt processors to handle some of the processing demand for local food banks. That request for modification by our state authorities was denied. I have attached the details of the plan to this letter.

I believe the request by our state meat inspection authorities is a reasonable step that should be approved. Our proposed protocols would enforce the intent of our food safety regulations and ensure that food is not wasted at a time when many Montanans need access to food during this crisis.

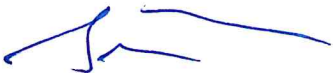
In general, the systemic issues that exist in Montana for meat processing capacity will continue to be a barrier even after the COVID-19 situation has abated. Our livestock producers will continue to be reliant upon marketing out of state at the mercy of national and international market forces and players. Increased processing capacity within the state would allow for more direct sales to consumers and service to niche value added markets. This is especially true for small and beginning farmers and ranchers.

Given that that the cost of meeting current federal meat and inspection standards continues to be a chief reason cited for a lack of investment in going to a full slaughter inspection status we must think creatively about how we support these rural economic opportunities and the continuation of agriculture. I would ask that USDA Food Safety and Inspection Service consider strongly how we encourage new ideas.

For example, mobile slaughter in our state has been an incredible tailwind for our domestic bison producers to get their product marketed and it makes sense that similar opportunities could be opened through the law for domestic species such as cattle and pork. Also, our state meat inspection program is required to meet or exceed federal standards, yet the establishments regulated by this program can only market their product in intrastate commerce. Since USDA has provided reciprocity to many foreign nations importing product to the United States there should not be reason that we would not allow the same market access to our state programs that are directly audited and partially funded by USDA.

Thank you for consideration of my request for approval of our proposed revisions to our meat inspections in order to avoid waste and provide safe, nutritious food to Montanans during this emergency. And, thank you for considering my thoughts on improving our markets in Montana.

Sincerely,



STEVE BULLOCK  
Governor

**PROPOSED PROTOCOL FOR REVISED (ENHANCED) INSPECTION OF CUSTOM EXEMPT FACILITIES:**

1. A food bank or other non-profit distributing food to people in need has a shortage of protein
2. The food bank has identified a live animal source from a livestock producer.
3. The food bank can document that there is no inspected facility that is able/willing to provide slaughter and processing services (this could be because of capacity, distance, cost, travel restrictions, etc.)
4. The food bank has a custom exempt facility locally that they can work with
5. The custom exempt facility would apply for a permit with the Meat and Poultry Inspection Bureau (MPI). Documentation with the permit would include:
  - a. Destination for the product
  - b. Source of the animals
  - c. Date and time of anticipated slaughter
  - d. Approximate anticipated volume
6. MPI reviews the documentation that an inspected facility is not an option
7. MPI issues the permit if all conditions are met
8. MPI commits to have a state inspector onsite for slaughter. The inspector would verify:
  - a. Humane handling
  - b. Sanitation/sanitary dressing during slaughter
  - c. Conduct antemortem and postmortem inspections
9. The custom exempt facility must keep slaughter records including animal owner, carcass weight, product weight, distribution record showing food bank destination
10. An expiration date for this policy would be included – likely it would extend through the duration of Governor’s declaration of emergency or until markets gain some normalcy