

Support H.R. 2657, the PRIME Act

H.R. 2657, the Processing Revival and Intrastate Meat Exemption (PRIME) Act, would empower states to set the standards for the sale of custom-processed meat within their states. Passage of the PRIME Act would support small farmers who currently lack reasonable access to processing facilities and improve consumer access to locally raised meats.

Under current federal law, meat from a custom facility cannot be sold. Instead, it can only go to the individual(s) who own the animal at the time the slaughter took place. This means that the customer(s) must buy the whole animal while it is still alive, effectively purchasing hundreds of pounds of meat without knowing the final weight or the price per pound. This is not desirable or feasible for most consumers.

In order to sell meat, even at a local farmers market, farmers must take the animals to a slaughterhouse that has an inspector on-site during processing. Because of the lack of inspected facilities in many parts of the country, farmers often have to haul their animals several hours, increasing expenses for the farmer, driving prices up for consumers, and creating stress on the animals.

The lack of inspected slaughterhouses is due to both burdensome regulations and the consolidation of the meat industry. Four companies control processing of over 80% of the country's beef, and four companies control the processing of two thirds of the country's pork.ⁱ The consolidation has led to most meat being processed at massive plants where as many as 400 cattle are slaughtered an hour.ⁱⁱ The likelihood of mistakes that affect food safety and quality increases dramatically when six or seven 1,000-lb animals are slaughtered every minute.

In contrast, because small-scale custom slaughterhouses handle a tiny fraction of the number of animals, they can provide greater quality control. But the current law provides no flexibility for states to set their own standards for meat that is sold by the cut. At this time, even if a state establishes its own inspection program, it must use the exact same standards as the federal program; the only real difference is who hires the inspectors.

The PRIME Act restores flexibility for states to set their own health and safety standards for the sale of meat from custom slaughterhouses. Meat from state-regulated facilities could then be sold to in-state consumers and to restaurants, grocery stores, and other establishments that directly serve consumers in that state. Passage of the PRIME Act would enable states to devise their own regulations for custom plants that are appropriate for small-scale operations.

The lack of slaughterhouse infrastructure is one of the biggest obstacles to a prosperous local food system. Passage of the PRIME Act can reduce the price of locally produced meat by allowing local farmers to use small, local plants that have regulations set by the state. The PRIME Act is a first step toward rebuilding local processing infrastructure and reviving rural economies.

Contact: Elizabeth Rich, Executive Director, Farm-to-Consumer Legal Defense Fund,
elizabeth@farmtoconsumer.org, 703-208-3276.

ⁱ Heffernan, W. & Hendrickson, M. (2007). Concentration of agricultural markets. University of Missouri, Department of Rural Sociology. Posted online at <http://www.foodcircles.missouri.edu/07contable.pdf>

ⁱⁱ GRACE Communications Foundation. Food Processing & Slaughterhouses. 2015. Quoting Schlosser, E. (2002). *Fast Food Nation: The Dark Side of the All-American Meal*. New York, NY: Houghton Mifflin Company. Posted online at <http://www.sustainabletable.org/279/food-processing-slaughterhouses>