



Policies and Drawbacks of the US Meatpacking Industry

Grace Gerwe*

Yale University, Department of Environmental Studies, New Haven, Connecticut

Abstract

The consumption of meat has been a part of the human diet since about 2.6 million years ago. Having evolved over centuries alongside the human species, it is now deeply tied to various cultures around the world. This includes American culture, as meat is one of the fundamental components of the Standard American Diet, made up of traditionally unhealthy food choices too high in sugars and processed foods. Even amidst the increasing popularity of veganism and a shift towards more plant-based dietary changes, meat consumption has not and will not be completely eliminated in the near future, and can be incorporated into a healthy lifestyle for its multiple health benefits when consumed in moderation. As the largest segment of US agriculture, the meat and poultry industry is a defining part of the American food system. This highlights the importance of understanding the primary laws and regulations governing meatpacking. The need is greater than ever to ensure that these policies are positively impacting the consumer, the environment and the farmers themselves, especially small, independent farmers, which are generally less favored in an oligopolistic economic system. While the regulations in place provide ample structure, detailed guidelines and specific policies for maintaining the necessary health and safety standards involved in meatpacking, their complicated structure imposes regulatory difficulties on independent farmers, limits consumer choice, and chokes small-scale production.

Keywords: Meatpacking; Food polic; Agricultural policy; Livestock production; Small farms; Organ meat

Primary laws and regulations governing meatpacking

The US has extensive policies in place regulating the slaughter and processing of meat. Meatpacking is under the purview of the USDA, which oversees meat, poultry and egg products, and the primary relevant legislation in the US is the Federal Meat Inspection Act of 1906. It was passed as a result of reports on the meatpacking industry's unsafe and unsanitary practices, which were published because the industry had caught the attention of the public via multiple muckraking pieces, such as *The Jungle* by Upton Sinclair that exposed many of the shocking details [1]. The FMIA's primary mandates were: the establishment of sanitary standards for meat processing plants and slaughterhouses, livestock inspection prior to slaughter, post-mortem carcass inspection and periodic inspections of slaughterhouses and processing facilities [2]. These requirements remain largely unchanged today and are the basis of the way the industry is structured, in the form of quality standards and detailed protocols. In addition to the fundamental piece of legislation, the USDA has established the necessary governing body to oversee its implementation. The needed monitoring and inspections are carried out by the Food Safety and Inspection Service (FSIS), founded in 1977. It is a public health regulatory agency under the USDA that monitors over 6.6 thousand establishments and also ensures proper packaging and labelling. To become an inspected meat or poultry processing plant, a process known as obtaining a grant of inspection, a farmer first has to acquire acceptable letters approving their water sourcing, sewage system and other facilities [3]. They must precisely state all equipment and ensure that they have each necessary component that is accepted by the USDA [4]. Then, once they can apply for inspection, and they are visited by an FSIS representative, the farmer is issued a 90 day grant to validate their Hazard Analysis Critical Control Point (HACCP) plan [3]. This plan ensures product safety, the importance of which is heightened in the slaughtering process. It includes an outline of each step in the food production process and the potential hazards that need to be controlled, in the form of a written Sanitation Standard Operating Procedures (SSOP) plan. 27 States, not including Connecticut, also have a State Meat and Poultry Inspection

(MPI) Program, which enforces requirements at least equal to those imposed under the Federal Acts. All together, the USDA oversees a comprehensive process that precedes the certification of a processing facility, ensuring high quality standards and maintaining rigorous safety precautions.

Policy impact on small-scale farmers

Although such policies are in the interest of public health and safety, they make the production process more complicated for small scale farmers. From the point of view of Pete Sepe, owner of Sepe Farms and President of the Fairfield County Farm Bureau, the presence of such stringent regulations complicates the process of bringing meat to the market. He explains that depending on the desired final outcome, there can be different procedures and considerations that need to be taken into account. Take the most common route of meat resale via a butcher: the animal has to be slaughtered and processed at a USDA certified facility, and the carcass then delivered to a butcher. However, the butcher has to be certified by the Department of Public Health, not necessarily by the USDA, two bodies between which, according to Sepe, there is no communication. If, on the other hand, the meat is to be sold directly from the farm, after the same slaughter and processing procedures, the carcass must be fabricated (broken down into consumer cuts) by a USDA inspected butcher. Then, the desired parts must be labelled with the USDA emblem and picked up by the farmer. Otherwise, in some specific cases, the farmer can slaughter and process an animal at their own farm, which is also supervised by

*Corresponding author: Grace Gerwe, Yale University, Department of Environmental Studies, New Haven, Connecticut, E-mail: grace.gerwe@yale.edu

Received: 01-Jun-2022, Manuscript No. jflp-22-67268, **Editor assigned:** 03-Jun-2022, PreQC No. jflp-22-67268 (PQ), **Reviewed:** 17-Jun-2022, QC No. jflp-22-67268, **Revised:** 22-Jun-2022, Manuscript No. jflp-22-67268 (R), **Published:** 29-Jun-2022, DOI: 10.4172/2332-2608.1000353

Citation: Gerwe G (2022) Policies and Drawbacks of the US Meatpacking Industry. J Fisheries Livest Prod 10: 353.

Copyright: © 2022 Gerwe G. This is an open-access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License, which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original author and source are credited.

a USDA certified official. There are also certain loopholes regarding certifications depending on the type and amount of animal, such as the ability for farmers to process without inspection up to 1,000 birds of their own raising on their premises. In this way, the amount and specifics of government regulations impact a farmer's capacity to sell meat and poultry products.

Variety cuts and organ meats

Furthermore, the USDA restricts the types of food products allowed to be introduced into the market, affecting the options available to consumers and the possible economic gain of farmers. There are certain cuts that the USDA does not allow to be salvaged from the slaughtering process for human consumption: the skin, blood, stomach, intestines, lungs and spleen. Farmers can store them in a separate freezer labelled "not for human consumption," which USDA officials do not look at when they inspect the farm. However, Sepe pointed out that these cuts are still desired as food by multiple groups of people. He emphasized that as a small farmer, any additional sources of income are welcome, and not to try and use them would be a waste. So, in order to get around this issue, there are multiple ways that he and other small scale farmers have been turning to, such as selling the animal live or selling herd shares.

Attempted solutions

Live animal purchase

Selling an animal live consists literally of someone buying an entire animal before they are slaughtered. This way, the buyer owns every part of the animal, including the parts that do not pass USDA human consumption regulations. With this kind of agreement, the farmer is effectively paid for every part of raising and processing the animal, but does not own it anymore, slightly changing the specifics of certain legal details and standings. Nevertheless, by owning the whole animal, the buyer has the right to ask for any part of it that they want. In that way, the farmer can sell any cut, including the stomach and other organ meats, directly to the customer. Technically, they are not selling it for human consumption and not breaking any law: what the buyer does with the cuts is up to them.

Of course, buying a whole live animal requires a lot of knowledge on how to use every cut that the average American consumer doesn't have. Sepe's customers that choose to do so are usually part of smaller ethnic groups, such as Italians, Greeks or Muslims. This is a reflection of a significant cultural difference between the US and other countries regarding organ meats and other variety cuts: they are not as widely consumed in America. Across many cultures and civilizations historically, organ meats are highly valued and commonly eaten. Their importance comes from their nutrient density and high bioavailability, meaning that pound for pound there are no foods in nature that have a higher concentration of easily absorbable nutrients than organ meats. The lack of knowledge in the US around these benefits results in a lower demand, which means that farmers often leave them at the slaughterhouses, where they are either thrown away or taken by rendering companies along with other meat by products and repurposed into animal feed, sausage casing, cosmetics, ground meats and other products, following highly specific guidelines in order to maximize public health, prevent the spread of disease and minimize contamination from carcass waste products [5].

Herd shares

However, part of the larger cultural trend of healthy eating and

finding the optimal diet has been a noteworthy revived interest in organ meats. To meet this new interest and reduce waste, many farmers are starting herd share programs. With this kind of agreement, customers purchase a portion of the herd, similar to buying stock of a company. In exchange for paying a monthly fee to maintain the herd, the customers are provided with their portions weekly. While this contract gives customers access to all parts of the animal, it also gives them less choice over which specific cuts they get, as it depends on the demands of the other shareholders and the exact cuts in stock. Therefore, by offering herd shares or selling the animal live, farmers attempt to get around USDA regulations and sell every part of the animal, including organ meats, to maximize their revenue, eliminate waste and meet consumer demand.

Slaughterhouse certification

Just as these methods have sprung up to minimize food waste, farmers are also trying to optimize animal processing speed. A consequence of having strict meatpacking protocols and controlling every aspect of the process through the USDA is the lack of certified slaughterhouses. Farmers need to wait months, sometimes even a year, to get a time slot to process their animals, and have to truck them across long distances, causing a huge bottleneck compared to vertically integrated CAFOs. Margery Feldberg, from DeHoek's Farm, recently got the licensing to become Connecticut's fourth full-service USDA approved slaughterhouse. She said all of the farmers around her want to take advantage of her services and that she has a long waiting list. However, the process of becoming USDA certified was long and arduous, and included debate around zoning approval, permissions from the local board, other paperwork and many time consuming inspections. Feldberg said that there's only one other farm in New England that's done what she has because it just doesn't pay off. She highlights the complicated process and a huge lack of skilled staff as significant challenges. Her example is one of many that show how the regulatory level of scrutiny can hurt instead of benefit farmers, particularly those with smaller capacities.

Mobile meat processing units

To try and work around these limited resources, mobile processing plants have originated as a solution with meaningful potential but questionable viability. They are purpose-built, FSIS-inspected vehicles with the ability to travel between farms and offer built-in meat slaughter and processing services. In an ideal scenario, the mobile slaughter unit would save farmers time and effort, while reducing the stress incurred on the animal and unsustainable impact due to travel. This travel time also drastically decreases the quality of the meat by the release of adrenaline in the animal muscle, counteracting the effort spent to raise high quality animals [6]. In reality, the cost and logistics of a mobile unit make such a system very difficult to pull off. A mobile slaughter unit that's inspected by the FSIS must comply with the same regulations as a fixed slaughter facility while also being able to travel long distances, so there are less than 20 operating units countrywide. Natural Harvest LLC is a unit run by the Prem brothers in Wisconsin. Their success is a reflection of the high demand for their service: they're booked out for months in advance even though their fees are \$30-50 more per head for beef, or \$10-20 more for pigs [7]. Not even including the local, county and state regulations, breaking even as a mobile slaughter unit is hard to achieve, considering the equipment costs, gas price, and limited storage capacity. While an innovative and potentially effective solution, the scalability of mobile slaughter units limits their impact and are not enough to fully make up for the inefficiencies of slaughterhouses spread thin.

Anti-monopolistic legislation

Part of why farmers struggle to compete for resources is the prevalence of CAFOs and their control of the industry, against which there has been some attempted but unsuccessful legislation. All farms are subject to the same regulations and inspection requirements in the face of the law regardless of their size, giving a huge advantage to CAFOs with more money, lobbying power and resources. In 2021, Senator Cory Booker reintroduced the Farm System Reform Act, legislation that would combat monopolistic practices and invest in a more sustainable food system. Its focus would be to phase out CAFOs by 2040 and restore mandatory country-of-origin labelling, prohibiting animal products that are imported to and then processed or repackaged in the US from being labelled “product of USA”, as is currently allowed even if the product is raised in another country [8]. This promotes fair competition and gives smaller farmers greater opportunity in a market that is largely controlled by 4 companies. This legislation gained new urgency during the Covid-19 pandemic, which exposed the detrimental practices, such as close confinement, of CAFOs, but was not passed by the Senate, likely because its methods of implementation were deemed too aggressive and received too much pushback.

Cooperatives

Another effort at levelling the playing field for independent family farms has been the implementation of cooperatives, or co-ops, agreements between producers of similar types of goods, which are not always successful. Their primary strength is the shared access to resources that they provide allowing producers to achieve greater economies of scale increase their bargaining power and decrease their reliance on non-local options [6]. This takes place in the form of bulk discounts, more advantageous price negotiations and increased returns. However, a lack of governance rules and management ability often lead to their failure. Specifically, lack of collaboration between members, free riders, verbal rather than written contracts, and a general absence of organization all lead to their collapse [9]. And so, co-ops are another example of an attempted solution that hasn't quite made the intended impact [10-15].

Recommendations

Overall, the meatpacking industry in the US imposes overcomplicated procedural structures, creates unnecessary restrictions, and disadvantages small scale farmers, even though it provides strong legal guidelines necessary for maintaining food safety and public health. Instead of relying on unorganized or overly

ambitious endeavours to truly fulfil its goals, as is the case with co-ops and the Farm System Reform Act, respectively, a gradual, well-thought-out, controlled approach is needed in order to optimize resources, efficiency and cost in the meatpacking industry for all players involved. One potential solution is to create more well-paid, protected and quality jobs in the space, centered on small operations, to counter labor shortages and further support the most vulnerable. Another is to increase education amongst the public about the health benefits of and ways to cook with organ meats and other uncommonly requested cuts. Or, streamlining the USDA certification process and decreasing its cost to make it more accessible to farmers. Actions such as these can continue to build on the strong foundation of a US meat slaughter and processing industry that has yet to fully benefit many of those which it affects the most.

References

1. Rouse KL (2021) Meat Inspection Act of 1906. Encyclopedia Britannica.
2. Denise A (2016) Federal Meat Inspection Act, Food Safety and Inspection Service. USDA Web.
3. Kanna K (2022) How to Apply for Meat and Poultry Inspection, Niche Meat Processor Assistance Network. Web.
4. Meat and Poultry Equipment Program (2012), Accepted Equipment List. Summary of Federal Inspection Requirements for Meat Products.
5. Sepe Pete (2022) Interview Conducted by Grace Gerwe. Small Plant Help Desk, FSIS. Summary of Federal Inspection Requirements for Meat Products. Food Safety and Inspection Service USDA.
6. Ricker H (2020) Ranchers Form Co-Op to Address Meat Processing Bottleneck. Civil Eats.
7. Wargoner R (2021) Mobile Slaughter Units Are Rarely More than a Pipe Dream. Farm and Dairy Web.
8. Booker C (2022) Farm System Reform Act. Scribd Web.
9. Nason J (2015) The pros and cons of producer cooperatives. Beef Central.
10. Amann A, Denise (2022) An Introduction to Mobile Slaughter Units. USDA Web.
11. Feldberg M. (2022) Interview, Conducted by Grace Gerwe. Hazard Analysis HACCP Plan, Beef Slaughter. Web.
12. HACCP Model for Beef Slaughter, Food Safety and Inspection Service.
13. Herdshare School (2022) What is a herdshare program? Web.
14. Carcass Management Course, Rendering Module. USDA.
15. Booker C (2019) How to Apply for Meat and Poultry Inspection, Niche Meat Processor Assistance Network. Web.