

2162 RAYBURN HOUSE OFFICE BUILDING
WASHINGTON, DC 20515

PHONE: 202-225-6116
FAX: 202-225-5590

WWW.PINGREE.HOUSE.GOV



CHELLIE PINGREE
CONGRESS OF THE UNITED STATES
1ST DISTRICT, MAINE

COMMITTEE ON APPROPRIATIONS
SUBCOMMITTEES:
AGRICULTURE, RURAL DEVELOPMENT, AND
RELATED AGENCIES
INTERIOR, ENVIRONMENT, AND RELATED
AGENCIES

May 12, 2020

The Honorable Nancy Pelosi
Speaker of the House
U.S. House of Representatives
H-232, The Capitol
Washington, D.C. 20515

Dear Speaker Pelosi,

Thank you for your ongoing leadership during this unprecedented crisis. As America moves through this uncertain time filled with images of empty store shelves, farmers plowing under fields of vegetables, and long lines at food banks, it is imperative that we continue to focus on the ways in which existing infrastructure can be shored up or modified to provide the greatest level of access for consumers to farm raised goods.

A USDA spokesperson reported that, as of May 5th, 197 of its Food Safety and Inspection Service (FSIS) field employees are unavailable for work due to positive coronavirus tests, and another 120 FSIS employees are under self-quarantine after having been exposed to COVID-19. This frightening reality for frontline inspection workers is also a staggering loss to the FSIS field inspection workforce, and yet another challenge placed upon our farmers and meat processing system by the coronavirus pandemic.

The USDA currently offers states flexibility in providing a variety of inspected and monitored facilities, recognizing their value in maintaining both the family farm, and a robust access to locally raised meat in the United States. However, we are now experiencing a strain on our food supply system like none we have seen before. With an eye toward resiliency, we must act to facilitate production in a way that will support the small and midsize farms who drive local economies across America, while getting quality food to consumers.

I am writing to request that you consider the Processing Revival and Intrastate Meat Exemption (PRIME) Act, H.R. 2859, as you seek solutions to the Nation's processing and supply crisis. This bill offers an additional avenue for farmers in their efforts to supply their communities with fresh, locally raised meats. With much of rural America already suffering from a dearth of federally inspected slaughter and processing infrastructure, it is not uncommon for small and midsize farms to travel hundreds of miles to facilities, incurring transportation and equipment costs, as well as lost on-farm labor hours. The PRIME Act mitigates these ongoing barriers; at

the same time, it addresses the very immediate need to get animals processed and to market, clearing the pipeline without farmers suffering the further demoralizing injury of euthanizing their animals while being unable to feed their neighbors.

With 27 state inspection programs already sanctioned by the USDA, we appreciate the flexibility that currently exists to meet the needs of both farmers and consumers. These partnerships have allowed intrastate sales to retail establishments, and consumers, in a way that is safe and supportive. In 2018, my own State of Maine entered into a new cooperative agreement with USDA-FSIS in the CIS program (Cooperative Interstate Shipment program). The CIS program has been successful in allowing facilities to scale-up to provide farmers with an avenue for interstate sales, expanding their market shares and providing much needed income. The State of Maine also licenses many Custom Exempt facilities. Often multigenerational, these small processors have put food on the tables of their communities for decades. Their skill and attention to safety secures their reputation-based business in a way that informs their practices and dictates their compliance with state standards.

In urging your consideration of the PRIME Act, I am not advocating for relaxing the standards that the USDA has set, nor am I seeking to diminish the critical work of the FSIS program in maintaining quality and consumer safety. I am simply asking that we address the needs of communities in a way that supports them both economically and morally during this unprecedented time by allowing America's family farms to do what they do best – feed their neighbors. Utilizing existing Custom Exempt facilities to create slaughter and processing opportunities for intrastate sales will be a powerful demonstration of the commitment we have made to small and midsize farms, and local economic recovery.

Sincerely,



Chellie Pingree
Member of Congress