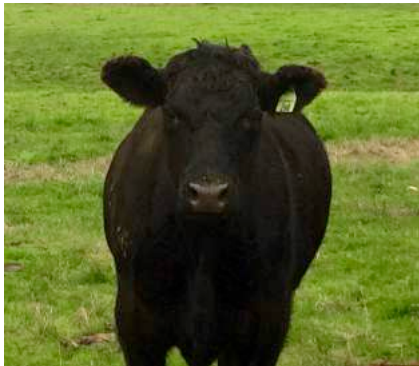


**NICHE MEAT PROCESSOR
ASSISTANCE NETWORK**



Regional Meetings

Survey Results



Small and Very Small Meat and Poultry Processor Stakeholder Regional Meetings with Food Safety Inspection Service Leadership

Participant Perspectives

**Report prepared by the Niche Meat Processor Assistance Network and the
National Sustainable Agriculture Coalition**

February 2018

Background

From October 2016 to October 2017, four regional meetings were held around the United States between small and very small meat and poultry processors, high-ranking USDA Food Safety Inspection Service (FSIS) officials, and local meat sector stakeholders and support organizations. The purpose of the meetings was for small processors to speak directly with FSIS officials about their needs and challenges, and discuss ways that these can be addressed by the Agency.

The National Sustainable Agriculture Coalition (NSAC) organized the meetings with input from a working group of small plant operators and others, including the Niche Meat Processor Assistance Network (NMPAN). Local hosts included: Gunthorp Farm, Heifer International, Grassroots Farmers Cooperative, Dirigo Food Safety, and NMPAN. Each meeting included a plant tour and a farm tour. Meeting dates and locations were as follows:

- October 2016, La Grange, Indiana. Farm/plant tour and meeting at Gunthorp Farm.
- March 2017, Little Rock, Arkansas. Farm tour at Falling Sky Farm in Leslie, AR, plant tour at Natural State Processing in Clinton, AR, and meeting at Heifer International in Little Rock.
- June 2017 Yarmouth, Maine. Farm tour at North Star Sheep Farm and plant tour Windham Butcher Shop; both in Windham, ME. Meeting at Dirigo Food Safety in Yarmouth, ME.
- October 2017 Portland and Canby, Oregon. Farm/plant tour at Revel Meat Co. in Canby, and meeting at the Federal Building in Portland.

Total attendance at all four meetings was approximately 45 people (not including state or federal employees); a handful of participants attended all or multiple meetings. Additional background and meeting notes are available online at:

<http://www.nichemeatprocessing.org/policy-engagement-for-processors/>.

Evaluation

NSAC and FSIS agreed to assess the value of the meetings after the first four were completed, and to use evaluation results to plan next steps. NMPAN surveyed participants in December 2017; of the 45 attendees, 21 responded (a response rate of 47%).*

Who responded to the survey

Respondents selected all categories that applied to them. Nearly a third (30%) were from USDA-inspected plants that slaughter, fabricate, or do both. Thirty-eight percent reported doing amenable species processing, custom exempt processing, and/or retail exempt processing. Thirteen percent were farmers or ranchers, and eleven percent were with Cooperative Extension, nonprofits, certifiers, retailers, and/or food safety consultants.

Benefits from the meetings

When participants were asked to name two or three benefits of participating in the meetings, respondents gave a variety of answers, which can be grouped into a few general themes:

- Gaining helpful information and regulatory clarification
- One-on-one interaction and open dialogue with FSIS officials
- Assurance that FSIS officials are interested in small plant viability, willing to listen, encourage filing appeals and communicating directly about problems as needed, and committed to inspector training
- Networking with other processors, learning from each other, and realizing many plants have similar frustrations (for example, with inspectors and testing procedures)

One respondent noted, *“The opportunity to meet and directly discuss issues with USDA at a level that can affect actual change in policy.”* Another said a highlight of the meeting was creating *“fellowship with other small processors, [and] having a chance to at least share with USDA that things need changing.”* A third reported feeling *“the beginning of an alliance of small processors seeking to be heard and (finally) feeling heard.”*

Several participants spoke to the value of gaining a “direct line” to FSIS leadership. One processor who had attended all four meetings reported that his plant-level inspection had already changed for the better. *“I’ve seen progress, and I want to say thank you. I think it’s been an outstanding platform for us to have this dialogue, keeping me wanting to come back.”*

Frustrations about the meetings

We then asked respondents what, if anything, was frustrating about the meeting(s) or did not meet their needs. Answers fell into a few themes:

* Actual rate may be higher as attendees representing the same business may have filled out only one survey.

- The meetings were too short to allow detailed and meaningful discussion of problems or potential solutions
- Some of the advice offered by FSIS officials was likely impractical for small plants (e.g., contacting top officials for help without risking retribution)
- Individual processor grievances used up meeting time that could have been spent more constructively
- FSIS appears unlikely to make changes discussed at the meetings, especially around humane handling

Several people, perhaps drawing on long-standing feelings that small and very small plants have been ignored by the Agency, echoed this last sentiment.

Improved understanding of policy

When we asked if attending the meetings had improved (or worsened) their understanding of how to give feedback to FSIS about laws, regulations, and other policies, 55% said their understanding had improved “a great deal,” and another 25% said it had improved “a little.”

Small plants being heard

When asked whether the needs of small and very small plants are being heard by FSIS, most (57%) said “yes, somewhat;” only 10% said, “yes, definitely.” A full third of respondents reported that they do not believe they are being heard much, if at all.

Positive outcomes

We asked if anything new or positive had happened as a result of attending one or more of the meetings. Business connections were the top answer, followed by making a USDA contact that has helped out with something.

Positive Outcome	%	#
I made an important business connection	27%	11
I made a USDA contact that has helped me with something	24%	10
I learned something new for my business, such as a piece of equipment or infrastructure I saw on the tour	20%	8
I now understand better where to find resources (e.g., AskFSIS, guidance documents)	15%	6
Faster responses when I make inquiries to my front-line inspection staff or district offices	2%	1
Other (please explain)	12%	5
Total	100%	41

“Other” answers included “invaluable” connections with FSIS and other processors and being recognized as “a struggling plant with a face.” On the flip side, one respondent claimed to have learned “that FSIS is a partner of the big packers and views small plants as something to eliminate.”

Next Steps

With the four meetings complete, what should happen next? We offered respondents a range of ideas and asked them to select the ones they thought were most promising. Legislative strategies – federal and state-level – were most appealing, including collaborating with the American Association of Meat Processors (AAMP) and state-level processor trade associations. Continuing the meetings with FSIS in the current format was only the fourth choice; however, if combined with continuing the meetings with a more focused agenda, it ranked first.

Possible Next Steps for Small Plant Working Group	%	#
Work with NSAC and other partners to develop and advocate for legislative proposals to further the cause of niche meat and small and very small processing	20%	16
Collaborate with the American Association of Meat Processors (AAMP) and/or state-level meat processing associations on some policy work	17%	14
Attempt to make sure there are always at least two small or very small processors on the National Advisory Committee on Meat & Poultry Inspection (NACMPI), an advisory committee to USDA FSIS	17%	14
Continue to have quarterly meetings in different regions of the country along the same lines as the first four – structured dialogue with FSIS leadership on range of topics that stakeholders select	12%	10
Organize a once a year fly-in meeting for small and very small processors in Washington D.C. to meet with FSIS, other USDA offices, and with legislators	10%	8
Continue to have meetings in different regions of the country, but only when there is a specific topic or two where we can attempt to affect change on a specific guidance or regulatory activity.	9%	7
Hold occasional policy conference calls – with stakeholders plus FSIS, AMS, and/or legislative offices – instead of, or in addition to regional meetings	8%	6
Other	8%	6
Total (more than 100% due to rounding)	101%	81

Other suggestions included advocating for a small plant ombudsman within USDA to help with challenging situations and advocate for small plant concerns.

Conclusion

These results make it clear that the Small and Very Small Meat and Poultry Processor Stakeholder Regional Meetings have been useful and served a purpose. They made stakeholders feel heard, they helped people to connect and network, and the meetings aided in participants' understanding of how USDA FSIS operates and how to influence policy and implementation.

Despite the success of the meetings, frustrations for processors and those who depend on them are real and ongoing.

Connecting our work with AAMP, assuring a small plant voice on NACMPI, and continuing to work on more favorable legislation are the suggested next steps.

At this time, a fifth regional meeting is in the initial planning stages with FSIS for this spring, in Pennsylvania. We will use this evaluation to push for a different structure at this next meeting that better meets participant needs and goals as outlined in the survey.

Then, once the next meeting is evaluated, we will decide whether or not to continue with the FSIS leadership meetings, and also what new/additional approaches to pursue.

In the interim, and in the interest of all-of-the-above approach, we are also pursuing a meeting with USDA Secretary Sonny Perdue to discuss these issues and possible administrative reforms, based on some promising statements he has made in support of small and very small meat and poultry processors.