How many states in the Midwest have their own meat-inspection programs, and how do they operate?

By Ilene Grossman [1]
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Some local producers prefer state-level meat inspections to federal inspections; this article explains why and provides a brief overview of the nine state meat-inspection programs in the Midwest.

Nine states in the region — all but Michigan and Nebraska — are among the 27 nationwide that have their own inspection programs. Around the country, state inspectors oversee about 1,800 facilities. (Wisconsin and Ohio have highest the number of state-inspected processing plants in the country.)

State meat-inspection programs are accessed by smaller processors whose products are sold only within the state. (Interstate sales require federal inspections.)

For these smaller processors, several factors can lead them to choose state inspections. For example, federal inspectors are required to have an office and a changing area in a plant, so space can be a problem. Also, overtime charges for federal inspectors exceed similar state fees. In addition, some producers say it is quicker to get responses and advice from state agencies, which also can be more flexible when it comes to arranging inspection times.

Under cooperative agreements with the U.S. Department of Agriculture’s Food Safety and Inspection Service, state programs are required to enforce standards that are “at least equal to” those required under federal law. Because they must meet federal standards, the programs are substantially similar from state to state. The FSIS conducts intensive audits in several states each year, and also provides training and guidance to help ensure federal standards are being met.

States share the costs of inspections with the FSIS. This federal match has been crucial for states, doubling the size of their inspection budgets. Processors generally pay for any testing, if needed, and other extraordinary costs, such as overtime pay for inspectors.

To ensure that the animals being slaughtered are disease-free, state officials inspect live animals and check on the animals during the slaughter process. Inspectors visit once a day when facilities are processing meat.

Recently, supporters of state meat-inspection programs have successfully held off proposed funding cuts in several states, including Minnesota and Wisconsin. Supporters in Indiana were less successful; there, funding for meat inspection programs was reduced by half.

Significant cuts in state inspections can lead to long delays for slaughtering, causing producers to send animals to other states with shorter wait times. (It is unlikely, too, that the federal government...
has the budget resources to take over inspections of many plants that states currently oversee.)

The Indiana Rural Caucus recently gathered data to illustrate the importance of local meat production and inspection. It estimated that in 2009, Indiana producers spent $35 million, which went to purchase feed, supported local crops and helped pay for veterinary health services — income that might not remain in the community if animals are not raised and slaughtered locally.