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Meat and Poultry Processing

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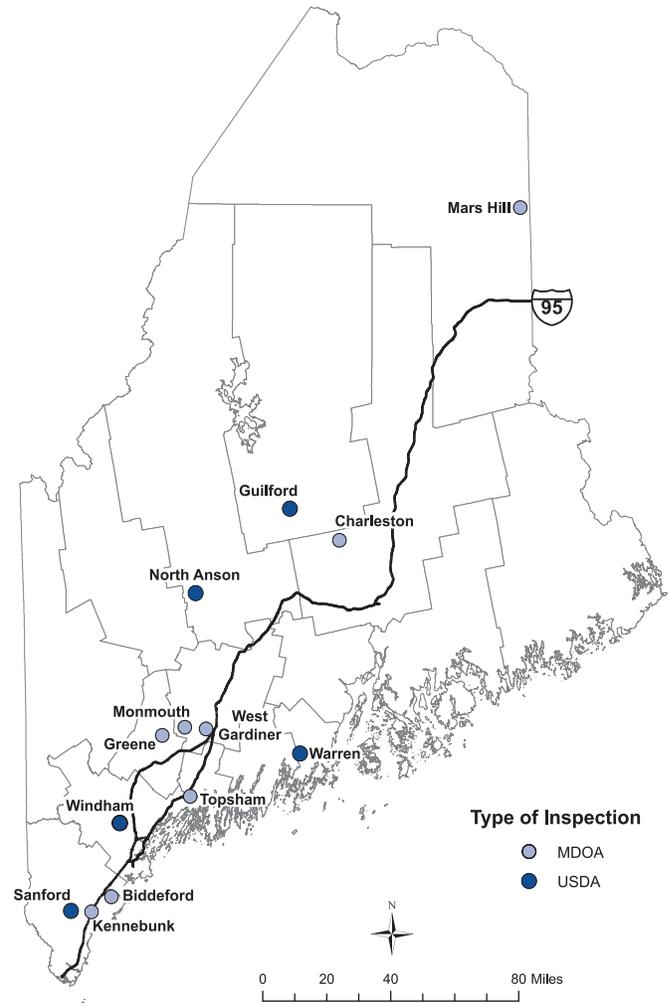
By Henrietta E. Beaufait

Agriculture across the U.S. has evolved into agribusiness engaged in large corporate farming since the 1980s. In Maine, farms seemed to stay small, diverse, and relatively vital. Since 2000 there have been a growing number of farmers and part-time farmers who are interested in raising livestock and poultry on their small farms for local distribution.

Extremely large corporate feedlots are almost nonexistent in Maine because they require a landbase large enough for housing, manure storage, transportation of feed and manure for distribution, and the availability of large quantities of animals to process on a frequent basis. On the other extreme, small producers struggle to produce enough product to consistently supply larger markets. The number of farmers' markets, both seasonal and year-round, has grown, providing viable markets for small producers.

Since 2006, there has been a growing interest by local Maine food producers to create a variety of niche meat products such as sausages, jerky, meat pies, and smoked and cured products. These entrepreneurs are looking for a consistent flow of meat product throughout the year, including beef, pork, lamb, goat, bison, and poultry, to supply markets within Maine or the relatively close urban centers of Boston and New York City. The demand has prompted a few livestock producers to finish animals not only in the traditional fall season, but also throughout the year. The number of farmers hoping to grow and market poultry in all areas of the state has increased sharply in recent years, as has consumer interest in locally grown poultry. Start-up costs for small inspected poultry processors

FIGURE 1: Meat Processing Facilities



have contributed to the lack of inspected state or U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) poultry processing plants in Maine. Local poultry product is therefore kept from reaching consumers within the state and large urban centers outside the state.

With the introduction of the Maine Meat and Poultry Inspection program in 2003, producers now have access to 13 inspected slaughterhouses and processing plants across the state (see map, Figure 1). In addition to five slaughter establishments regulated by USDA, there are seven inspected red-meat establishments and one inspected poultry establishment regulated by the Maine Meat and Poultry Inspection

program. Inspectors are required to be on-site at each establishment whenever product destined for commerce is slaughtered and processed. Inspection duties include verification that animals presented for slaughter are handled humanely, that these animals are disease free, that meat and poultry products are not adulterated, and that all product is accurately labeled upon presentation to the consumer. The Maine Department of Agriculture (DOA) Meat and Poultry Inspection program exists to protect consumer health and welfare.

The DOA's policy is to educate constituents to gain compliance with regulations and consumer safety. The DOA has coordinated and offered many educational opportunities, including beef quality assurance and pork quality assurance programs, training programs in hazard analysis of critical control points (HACCP) for meat and poultry processors, on-farm nutrient management and composting techniques, integrated pest management procedures, and seminars to teach good farm practices and humane handling of all farm animals, including a special visit from international humane-handling expert Temple Grandin, a professor at Colorado State University.

The DOA would like to move forward to promote livestock and poultry product sales in Maine. There is an immediate need for geographically positioned inspected poultry-processing establishments. At least one mid-Maine slaughterhouse is trying to include poultry inspection in its plans for expansion, with a target date of May 2011. This plan may be stymied due to a current lack of meat and poultry inspection staff. The DOA needs the support of the governor and legislature to increase the number of meat and poultry inspection staff to meet the needs of livestock producers and food entrepreneurs in the state. 🐾

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