

# SOLVING THE MEAT PROCESSING WORKFORCE BOTTLENECK

SUPPORTING LIVESTOCK FARMERS,  
PROCESSORS, & RURAL COMMUNITIES



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Access the full report at: <https://misa.umn.edu/meat-processing-bottlenecks>

## ABOUT THE AUTHORS

**Paul Sobocinski** is a Redwood County sustainable livestock farmer who raises pigs for Niman Ranch, and cattle for direct and market sale. For 40 years, Paul was a farm organizer for Land Stewardship Project and other organizations.

**Don Arnosti** has been an environmentalist working to support a sustainable local food system as a means to address environmental and social issues for 35 years. Don connects sustainable livestock and vegetable farmers and 200 interested consumers.

**Ted Suss** is a Redwood County small-scale sustainable livestock producer. He has decades of experience in the educational system, serving as a rural school district administrator, as well as the Executive Director of the State Board of Education.

**Maya Benedict** is a graduate student at the University of Minnesota School of Public Health, with a public health policy and rural health focus. She has six years of experience as a butcher and operations manager of a Saint Paul butcher shop specializing in locally-sourced meats.

**Courtney VanderMey** is a grant specialist with the Minnesota Department of Agriculture working with livestock related grants. She is completing her Masters in Agribusiness at Kansas State University. Her thesis is a needs assessment of meat processing businesses in Minnesota with the goal of assisting with business growth and transition.

The authors acknowledge the great deal of time and effort put forth by meat processors across Minnesota by participating in our interview process, as well as the contributions of our reviewers. The views and opinions of the participants interviewed in this report are their own, and quotes used in the report are verbatim. The interpretation of the collective quantitative and qualitative data obtained from interviews, as well as the recommendations set forth in this report are those of the authors.

## REVIEWERS

*Aaron Blyth, Latino Economic Development Center (LEDC)*

*Kathryn Draeger, University of Minnesota Regional Sustainable Development Partnerships*

*Paul Hugunin, Minnesota Department of Agriculture*

*Jane Jewett, Minnesota Institute for Sustainable Agriculture (MISA)*

*Stu Lourey, Minnesota Farmers Union*

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*Pictured from Left: Don Arnosti, Maya Benedict, Ted Suss, Paul Sobocinski, and Courtney VanderMey*



# I. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY



Small and medium-sized local livestock growers in Minnesota are facing limited meat processing access due to processor closures and fully-booked processing appointments. Existing processors are experiencing difficulties meeting increases in demand as other facilities have closed permanently. There is a distinct bottleneck in the Minnesota small meat processing industry, exacerbated by COVID-19 and the lack of a skilled workforce. Our project team “Solving the Local Meat Processing Bottleneck” was created with support from multiple community partners to better understand how to address and bolster local meat processing resiliency. We conducted interviews with 57 meat processors across Minnesota to study this issue, which included targeted outreach to underserved communities and input from potential workers and business owners.

We found that processors are navigating high demand and are interested in retaining long-term, reliable employees that could be molded to fit individual businesses. Overall cost (of training, wages, expansion of business, etc.) is also a concern. Processors are very interested in apprenticeships and are willing to teach slaughter and processing knowledge and skills, especially if apprentices stay on to work at the business. Processors believe that business management skills would be best taught in an educational setting. Incentives are important for employee retention from the perspective of processors, and the most popular incentives included health benefits, discounted meat, and free employee processing.

A third of interviewed processors have not started planning for transitions (the sale of their business). In general, successful transitions have involved family members or internally-trained employees, and failed transitions were associated with new owners from outside the industry. While many processors don’t know where to find transition resources, processors followed traditional routes of business guidance for a transition by describing a need for resources such as a lawyer, accountant, or banker.

Many workers in Latino/BIPOC communities are willing and able to work in the industry, and some are interested in ownership. Unique barriers need to be addressed to access this workforce and provide opportunities, including “earning while learning”, language barrier/translation resources, the undocumented status of a significant percentage of workers, and lack of access to capital.

Lastly, we discovered that very little locally-sourced meat from small/medium producers is being sold directly to consumers, local institutions, or to retail meat counters across Minnesota. The widespread use of non-local boxed meat in local meat counters results in a missed value-added opportunity that butcher shops could be providing to nearby farmers and their rural communities.



## Our recommendations based on collected interview data are:

### **Apprenticeships**

- Create a one-year apprenticeship for workers, with hands-on training in slaughter and meat processing. The apprenticeship would have a wage of \$15-18 per hour with state wage assistance of an additional \$3 per hour. Note: there is no wage assistance currently available. While wage assistance would be an excellent incentive, the lack of state incentives is no reason not to proceed with the program.
- Establish a pool of funds for small and medium processors for use for relocation packages, retention bonuses, training programs, etc.
- Pre-screen apprentices for both commitment to a meat processing career and level of comfort with slaughter work to address some issues with retention.
- Business management skills should be taught in a more formal educational environment, in target languages and with cultural sensitivity.

### **Transitions**

- The Minnesota Association of Meat Processors (MAMP) or another trade association should provide resources and information for ownership transitions to their membership.
- Targeted recruitment, training, and support for buyers wanting to take over a meat processing or slaughter business would increase the likelihood of a successful business ownership transition.
- Successful transition of existing businesses to future sustainable ownership must be prioritized by trade associations and associated organizations.

### **Further recommendations and opportunities for research, based on qualitative observations:**

- Existing Equal-To (E2) or US Department of Agriculture (USDA) inspected lockers that stock their retail counters with a high proportion of locally-raised meats should be studied with an eye towards replicating their success.
- MAMP, Minnesota Department of Agriculture (MDA), or other organizations should highlight the added community value of local retail counters selling local meat.
- The appropriate Minnesota state agency should investigate the possibility of a multi-employer health benefit pool for small meat lockers in Minnesota to make health care coverage more affordable for individual lockers to offer.
- Federal and state grant programs should provide further support (expanding eligibility, funding, etc.) to custom plants to support this vital local foods link between local livestock farmers and consumers.
- A “navigator” position should be established within the MDA to assist small and mid-sized processors in locating and accessing assistance of all sorts relevant to the industry.
  - *State financial resources should be made to navigator organizations (such as LEDC) that can assist immigrant apprentices with culturally-sensitive business management training.*

