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Hello. I am an Extension Specialist at Oregon State University and the Director of the Niche Meat Processor Assistance Network. We work to strengthen the niche meat supply chain by providing technical assistance, peer learning opportunities, and research for small and mid-scale meat processors and producers across the country. We are the go-to organization for folks looking to build and launch a new meat processing facility or expand capacity of an existing one.

HB2785 is a critical component of bolstering the state's meat processing capacity. Without access to funding, existing meat plants and new meat plants will struggle to keep up with demand and to open up critical slaughter and processing capacity for the livestock and poultry produced in this state.

When it was first proposed to start an Oregon state meat inspection program I advocated that ODA start with a funding program to help custom exempt plants make the necessary upgrades to be able to even qualify for state inspection. Otherwise there would not be enough facilities that would even want to be under that state meat inspection program. The state went ahead and launched the state meat inspection program, but thankfully at the same time it has been running three different stakeholder groups with regular meetings to gather feedback. The feedback is pretty clear that without investment tools such as a grant program, most custom exempt plants will not be interested in coming under state or federal inspection. The lift is just too great. Many of these plants are old, outdated, lack the proper waste treatment systems to expand, and need training in HACCP, recordkeeping, and humane handling systems. This proposed grant program would go a long way for plants to be able to make the physical upgrades and improve their employee training and recordkeeping systems.

I support this bill if the amendments are made to it, especially allowing the existing USDA inspected plants to also apply for these funds. They should not be penalized or prohibited from using this program just because they already went through the process of obtaining their FSIS grants of inspection. The funds should also prioritize plants that slaughter and process Oregon raised animals, rather than just buying in boxed commodity meat. That way the funds will strengthening the whole niche meat supply chain in Oregon, not just the processor side.

My only other suggestion is that if these funds can also be used by start-ups, that they have a clear, compelling case for why their facility should be built, including a solid business plan and cash-flow projections. It is important that tax payer dollars are used to fund real viable processing businesses that can last. I am happy to serve on a grant proposal review committee if you need some outside eyes.

It is pretty clear that the 16 or so other states that have started small meat processor grant programs are building the long-term capacity of their local and regional meat supply chains, creating more living wage jobs, and bolstering the viability of small and mid-scale farmers and ranchers in their states. It is the ideal time for Oregon to do the same.

Kindly,

-Rebecca Thistlethwaite, Director
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