

United States Senate

WASHINGTON, DC 20510

April 30, 2020

The Honorable Sonny Perdue
Secretary
United States Department of Agriculture
1400 Independent Ave., SW
Washington, D.C. 20228

Secretary Perdue:

I write today to ask that you grant the State of Montana's waiver application titled "Proposed Protocol for Revised Inspection of Custom Exempt Facilities," so that qualified processors may provide much-needed capacity for food banks. As COVID-19 continues to spread across the country, it is critical that we take steps to diversify our meat production in order to stabilize the food supply chain.

COVID-19 is spreading through U.S. meatpacking plants, sickening more than 5,000 people and killing 20. To date, 22 plants have closed, with varying dates for reopening. Because only four companies control the majority of the meatpacking industry, each major plant closure cuts roughly five percent of U.S. processing capacity. Experts estimate that 25 percent of U.S. processing capacity is offline right now. Industry consolidation has left our nation unprepared for a pandemic, and the shortcomings in our food system are increasingly evident.

These closures are having a striking impact on the food supply chain. Producers are left with too much product on hand, and some livestock producers are faced with the prospect of culling their herds because processing facilities are unable to accept new animals. At the same time, Montana food banks are seeing as much as a 300 percent increase in demand. Food shortages will disproportionately affect food banks, which must work to make their dollars go as far as possible. As demand for meat increases, but supply decreases, prices will go up and food banks will lose their purchasing power. Folks in Montana could go hungry if we do not explore new ways to diversify our meat production.

That's why I ask that you grant an exemption to the Montana Department of Livestock to allow select Custom Exempt Processors to provide slaughter capacity to food banks. The proposal would allow a food bank that has identified a live animal source, but is unable to find a willing or able inspected facility, to find a Custom Exempt Processor to process the animal. The Montana Department of Livestock has identified a rigorous set of criteria to ensure food safety and humane slaughter. This proposal aims to close the gap between food banks and producers, eliminate food waste, and ensure that we can keep food on the table for Montana families.

Thank you for your time and consideration of this proposal. I look forward to working with you on this important issue.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Jon Tester". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a long horizontal stroke extending to the right.

Jon Tester