



Northeast Organic Farming Association of Vermont

An organization of farmers, gardeners, and consumers working to promote an economically viable and ecologically sound Vermont food system

H.522

An Act Relating to the Viability of Vermont Agriculture

Written testimony submitted to the Vermont State Senate Committee on Agriculture on April 12, 2007 by David Rogers, Farm Policy Advisor, Northeast Organic Farming Association of VT, Richmond, Vermont

On behalf of its 1000+ members, NOFA-VT would like to thank the Committee for its careful consideration of H.522. We are impressed with the scope, importance and quality of the ideas and provisions included in this bill. We believe its approval and enactment would be a significant step in supporting the continued development of a strong and diversified agriculture in Vermont. NOFA-VT encourages the Committee to approve H.522 in its present form so that it may be acted upon by the full Senate.

I would like to provide brief comments on Sections 7 and 8 of the bill which pertain to the sale of poultry processed on farms without state inspection and marketed directly to consumers and restaurants. These sections have elicited a variety of public health related concerns.

For the Committee's information, I grew up on a family poultry farm that raised, processed and sold over 15,000 broilers each year at our farm store. I have an undergraduate degree in microbiology and was an animal disease microbiologist at UVM from 1974-1987.

Concerns expressed by some state officials, legislators and others, suggest that small-scale, uninspected, on-farm processing will likely result in increased bacteriological contamination of meat (as compared to current contamination levels found in inspected products) and, therefore, will expose the public to increased risk of foodborne illness.

My review of the current scientific literature fails to support these concerns. I found no studies regarding the bacteriological status of small-scale, on-farm processed poultry and none that suggest an increased public health risk of any kind.



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In fact, numerous published studies have documented what is widely known: that high levels of contamination by pathogenic microbes are commonly found in meat and poultry products processed in government inspected plants and sold to the public by distributors and retail outlets throughout the country. For example, a 2003 study of whole broilers purchased in U.S. grocery stores found that 33.9% were Salmonella-positive (J Food Protection. 2003 Mar;66(3):446-50). Salmonella in inspected poultry has, in the last twenty years, become one of the major sources of toxi-infection in humans (J Theor Biol. 2006 Oct 7;242(3):755-63). There are a number of published studies with similar findings with respect to inspected meat products and other human pathogens.

At the same time, other studies have found that stresses related to the crating, trucking and holding of live poultry at large-scale slaughter plants, where cross-contamination of flocks occur, significantly increases the levels of common human pathogens in poultry (J. Poultry Sci. 1995: 74:937-941 and others). On-farm processing of small poultry flocks would eliminate such sources of contamination. Other studies indicate that small scale, less intensive animal production systems may reduce both the prevalence and pathogenicity of bacterial species of concern.

Current studies do support widespread public concerns about the safety of the nation's meat and poultry products, but they do not support concerns that small-scale, on-farm processing may jeopardize the public's health; and they certainly do not support a position that government inspection insures the safety of raw meat and poultry products. As state and federal public health officials have repeatedly emphasized: Proper processing, handling and preparation of meat products – whether inspected or uninspected – is the only assurance of safety. Vermont's small-scale, local poultry producers understand this, as do Vermont's consumers and restaurateurs. Specific opposition to Sections 7 & 8 in H.522 on public health grounds lacks objective support.

I would be happy to answer any questions or provide further information to the Committee.