

Wisconsin Farmers Union: Vilsack visit uplifts investment in meat processing

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Ag Secretary stresses benefits will reach from farmer to consumer

CADOTT, Wis — U.S. Secretary of Agriculture Tom Vilsack and Ambassador Susan Rice, White House Domestic Policy Advisor, were in the Chippewa Valley Thursday promoting investments in regional meat processing.

Farmers, media, and rural leaders gathered at Crescent Meats in Cadott to learn more about the Meat and Poultry Processing Expansion Program and the area's designation as a Rural Partners Network community. The visit followed a [November 2nd announcement](#) that the Biden-Harris Administration is investing \$73 million in 21 grant projects through the first round of the [Meat and Poultry Processing Expansion Program](#) (MPPEP). The effort to bolster meat and poultry processing capacity aims to increase competition, support producer income, and strengthen the food supply chain to lower costs for working families.

WFU member and Crescent Meats owner Wayne Lautsbaugh has been awarded a \$1.5 million MPPEP grant to offset costs for an expansion that will nearly triple the square footage of the facility and double processing capacity. The project will also improve food safety and create 35 jobs.

"There is a lot of great work and entrepreneurship that's taking place in rural America," Vilsack said, noting the funding is part of an aggressive push by the Biden Administration to create a [Fairer, More Competitive, and More Resilient Meat and Poultry Supply Chain](#).

"If farmers have more markets, then they'll have greater competition for what

they're growing and raising and get a fairer price," Vilsack stressed. "If you create more processing, you also create a whole series of new products for consumers, who are very interested in knowing the story behind their food."

Theo Scholze of Scholze Family Farms in Humbird is among those who will benefit from the Crescent Meats expansion.

"We're excited about this as a producer growing our brand to do direct-to-consumer processing," Scholze said. "It's always a struggle to find a USDA-inspected processor so we can ship across state lines. Hopefully this gives us more opportunity to get our product out."

Danielle Endvick, who raises beef cattle on her family's Runamuck Ranch in Chippewa County, emphasized the importance of investing in infrastructure and increasing competition, noting, "Farmers often have few options when it comes to marketing and processing our cattle. For every extra mile we have to transport animals, it cuts into already tight profit margins. It's heartening to see this investment and the doors it could open for farmers who are direct marketing to consumers." Endvick also serves as the communications director for WFU.

[Montana Farmers Union](#) was among the grant recipients in this competitive round, earning a grant for their work with the producer-owned [MT Premium Processing Cooperative](#).

"For decades, consolidation in meat processing has put the squeeze on farmers, ranchers, and consumers while corporate monopolies rake in record profits," National Farmers Union President Rob Larew said in a statement earlier this week. "This announcement is another step toward putting control and profitability back in the hands of farmers, ranchers, and our communities. More competition across the ag economy is a good thing and it's great to see Secretary Vilsack and the administration making diversified, local and regional food systems a priority."

Farmers Union has advocated for [more competitive markets](#) and more access to local processing in its [Fairness for Farmers campaign](#).

In addition to the MPPEP grants, the Administration is investing \$75 million for eight projects through the Meat and Poultry Intermediary Lending Program, as well as more than \$75 million for four meat and poultry-related projects through the Food Supply Chain Guaranteed Loan program.

Additional funding announcements are anticipated over the next couple of months. USDA will also soon begin taking applications for a new phase to deploy an additional \$225 million, for a total of up to \$375 million, to provide gap financing for independent processing plant projects that fill a demonstrated need for more diversified processing capacity.

The USDA efforts complement work being done at the state level by the Wisconsin Department of Agriculture, Trade and Consumer Protection (DATCP) and are another step forward on the “Meat Processing Infrastructure and Services” Special Order of Business underscored as a priority by WFU’s grassroots membership over the past few years.

Wisconsin region added to Rural Partners Network

The Cadott tour stop also celebrated the expansion of the Rural Partners Network (RPN) to include 12 counties in Wisconsin. Launched in April 2022, RPN helps establish community networks to connect rural people to resources and funding to create local jobs, build infrastructure, and support long-term economic stability.

“Too often we’re not doing a good enough job getting key resources out to the communities that are underserved, including rural America, the tribal areas, and elsewhere,” Ambassador Rice said. “We know that when rural people thrive, America thrives, and that’s what we’re about here today.”

RPN is expanding to the following community networks in Wisconsin:

- Northern Wisconsin Community Network including Ashland, Iron and Price counties
- Greater Menominee Community Network including Menominee Indian Tribe of Wisconsin and Menominee County
- Forest County Community Network
- Northwestern Wisconsin Community Network including Eau Claire, Dunn, Clark, Buffalo, Pepin, and Chippewa counties
- Adams County Visionary Community Network

“It was enlightening to hear about all the resources that are out there for rural communities and to see one of our members benefit from meat processing grants,” said WFU Executive Director Julie Keown-Bomar. “These efforts are so positive for rural Wisconsin. More importantly, I was impressed that Ambassador Rice and

Secretary Vilsack realize that there has to be a bridge between institutions and rural communities.”

Information about the Rural Partners Network is available online at [Rural.gov](https://www.rural.gov).

Wisconsin Farmers Union (WFU) is a member-driven organization that is committed to enhancing the quality of life for family farmers, rural communities, and all people through educational opportunities, cooperative endeavors, and civic engagement. Learn more at www.wisconsinfarmersunion.com.