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Mailhot's Sausage

Charlotte Michaud

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## Lewiston Journal Article, Meat Inspection

Nancy Grape

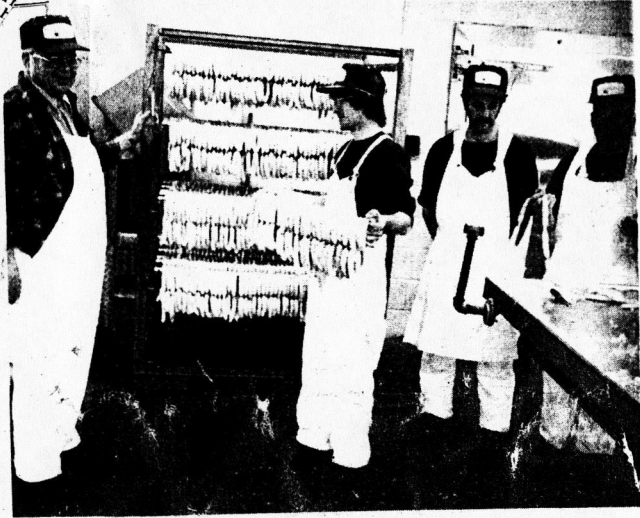
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## Tasty links

Lewiston's E. W. Mailhot Sausage Co. stands with a number of other Maine meat processors who think the state's meat inspection program is working well and oppose a shift to across-the-board federal inspection.

Here, Robert Mailhot, left, oversees a batch of tasty links with employees, left to right, Ray Tardif, Robert Pelletier, and George Janelle. (Staff Photo By Wardwell).

# Local voices protest meat inspection shift

By NANCY GRAPE  
Political Writer

AUGUSTA — A son, speaking for a Lewiston family business built on knowledge handed down generation to generation, stood front and center at the State House this week, opposed to ending Maine's state meat inspection program in favor of across-the-board federal inspection.

"Granddad did it, his mother taught him. Dad did it. Now my brother does it, that's the way it works," Ray Mailhot of the E.W. Mailhot Sausage Co. explained, Tuesday, to a crowded public hearing conducted by the legislature's Audit and Program Review Committee.

"We do the best we can, and we give a good product," Mailhot came to voice concern that a committee recommendation to end Maine's state meat inspection program — costing \$112,000 to \$114,000 in state money — will make doing business more difficult and more expensive for small meat processors throughout the state.

"I believe the Feds are good people way down deep, like you and me," Mailhot testified, "but there's less communication with them.

You don't get the response out of the Feds that you get out of the state. It's a big difference."

Roger Stearns of Lewiston's Martel Meat Inc. questioned changes and costs involved if Maine were to move to complete federal inspection.

"Unless things have changed," Stearns told the lawmakers, "I haven't seen an agency in Washington that would accept a blueprint that I would draw on my kitchen table."

Stearns also wondered aloud about any "saving" that might result in light of a proposed \$600,000 Agriculture Development Act now before the legislature.

The Lewiston men were part of an overflow crowd of more than 80 meat cutters, processors and veterinarians who came in business suits, hunting shirts and suede jackets to protest recommended phase-out of the state meat inspection program as a "duplication" of

service available from the federal government.

The parade of protest lasted more than three hours.

Currently, federal inspectors oversee meat processors involved in interstate commerce while in-state meat operations fall under state jurisdiction.

Total public cost of the state program is placed at \$255,000 in federal and state funds.

The committee, charged with reviewing state programs under Maine's "Sunset Law," is meeting strong opposition each time it recommends a cut in state services.

"To date, we find that every cut we've recommended, we've had people coming before us and nobody wants to accept it," declared Senate Chairman James A. McBreairty.

McBreairty, who heads the

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committee with House Chairman Rep. Georgette Berube of Lewiston, acknowledged "Sunset" cuts "may work hardships" on groups most directly affected.

He suggested, however, that "down the road a bit, when we get to the biggies like the Department of Human Services, it may pay off."

Worry about illegal "barnyard slaughterers," increased costs, health standard enforcement, and a loss of "rapport" with inspectors outweighed any thoughts of "down the road" savings in the minds of all but one man who testified yesterday.

The lone exception was Don Roy of Norway, who operates Oxford Foods and the Oxford Abattoir, formerly under state and now under federal inspection.

"The myth of Augusta compared to Washington as far as information and help is concerned is bologna," Roy declared, saying, "it is not impossible to continue in business in a fair and competitive nature."

"If the state-inspected plants, with some exceptions, want to stay in full-time business, they had better get their act together, spend some money on their establishments and meet 'equal to' requirements," Roy contended.

"Sure, some won't make it," Roy declared, "but if one is determined to stay in the meat business, it is possible to do it without chaos."

"Mailhot Sausage," Roy praised, "could go federal tomorrow."

From the rural areas of the state came small custom meatcutters who complained colorfully of illegal operations where farmers are "slaughterin' other people's critters in their barnyard."

State inspectors, they contended, can be quickly "clamped down" on "barnyard" operations. "If federal inspectors would federal inspect, be so near at hand," they said.

Maine's current federal in-

spectors would be unlikely even to know about such "barnyard" operations.

"Whenever I want to find out anything that is going on anywhere in the state of Maine, I have no problem," Inspector Joseph Lebreque volunteered, characterizing rural Yankees as "pretty close-mouthed" and "clannish."

"You've got to have a rapport with them or you're done," the 14-year veteran contended, saying: "We use the same book as the federal people do. We require them to meet the law, but we do it with a little compassion."

Not at issue in the disagreement is the standard Maine's commercial and custom meat cutters and processors must meet. Under legislation enacted last year, such operations must register annually on or before Sept. 1, starting this year, with federal standards governing their regulation.

Committee members had earlier expressed disapproval at a petition prepared and circulated by Dr. Stephen Ellis, who heads the state inspection program.

"I feel this is misleading somewhat," McBreairty said yesterday, holding one of the petitions aloft. "I guess everybody knows the volume that is being inspected is much greater by the federal people than by the state because of the size of the plants involved."

Tension simmered now and then between some committee members and Ellis, but Ellis also came in for praise from Falmouth Rep. Sherry Huber, who characterized his earlier testimony to the committee as "very even-handed."

While committee members, who included Lewiston State Sen. Carroll E. Minkowsky and Poland Rep. Glen W. Torrey, listened intently to the protests placed before them, it appears likely they will hold to their recommendation for phasing out the state inspection program in the bill they submit to the full legislature for decision.

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