



State Protections for Meatpacking Workers

A 2007 law aimed at protecting workers has been poorly publicized. But given the law's limitations, additional publicity may not affect working conditions.

Key Facts and Findings:

- Minnesota is one of the country's most active meatpacking states, with just over 12,000 workers in various meat processing jobs.
- Meatpacking plants in Minnesota are characterized by high employee turnover and large numbers of immigrant workers.
- Nationally, meatpacking workers have historically had higher injury rates than other manufacturing workers. But measured injury rates have declined in recent years.
- In Minnesota, rates of workers' compensation claims for serious injuries in meatpacking have been similar to rates in other manufacturing industries.
- The 2007 Legislature created the Packinghouse Workers Bill of Rights to address working conditions in meatpacking plants.
- The Packinghouse Workers Bill of Rights is mostly a restatement of existing laws; its major innovation was to require employers to provide certain information to workers in their "native language."
- The Department of Labor and Industry (DLI) has not adequately publicized the existence of the Packinghouse Workers Bill of Rights.
- However, because the law's requirements are so limited, it is not clear that greater publicity would change working conditions in meatpacking plants.

- Due to high injury rates, the Minnesota Occupational Safety and Health Division (MNOSHA) targets meatpacking employers for more frequent inspections.
- However, MNOSHA's targeting method relies on unverified data that has not included all meatpacking employers.

Key Recommendations:

- The Legislature should more clearly define the terms "meatpacking" and "native language" in the Packinghouse Workers Bill of Rights.
- DLI should do more to ensure that employers know about their obligations under the Packinghouse Workers Bill of Rights.
- MNOSHA should adjust its method of targeting meatpacking companies for inspection to ensure all relevant employers are included.
- The Legislature should consider alternative approaches to achieving the goals of the Packinghouse Workers Bill of Rights; we suggest several policy options for expanding the law or putting greater resources toward implementation.

Report Summary

Meatpacking is an important sector of Minnesota's manufacturing industry; it is one of the top ten states for turkey, hog, and cattle production. According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, just over 12,000 Minnesota workers hold meat processing jobs.

Meatpacking work can involve intense physical labor. Many employees do repetitive work on a production line that delivers meat to them at a constant pace. Worker advocates have charged that line speeds are often too fast, leading to increased injuries.

In 2007, the Legislature adopted the Packinghouse Workers Bill of Rights. The law requires meatpacking employers to inform employees, using the employee's native language, of various federal and state laws that protect workers.

Meatpacking plants employ many immigrant workers and experience high injury rates and high employee turnover.

Many meatpacking jobs do not require English skills or formal education, and thus attract immigrant workers. The meatpacking plants that we visited employed Hispanic, African, and Asian immigrant workers. Daily communication often occurred in two or more languages.

Workers in meat processing industries have historically had high injury rates compared to other manufacturing workers. In recent years, injury rates have declined, although critics argue that available statistics do not capture all injuries.

At any given point in the past seven years, most meatpacking plants in Minnesota had replaced more than one-fifth of their employees in the past year. Some plants have routinely experienced turnover rates over 40 percent. Constant training of new workers creates safety challenges.

The Department of Labor and Industry has not adequately publicized the Packinghouse Workers Bill of Rights.

The Department of Labor and Industry (DLI) sent out a single mailing to employers in 2007 and has done nothing to publicize the law since. Executives at two of the eight firms we visited had never heard of the law. Most workers we interviewed were also unfamiliar with the law. But the limited scope of the law calls into question whether additional actions by DLI would actually affect workers.

The Minnesota Occupational Safety and Health Division (MNOSHA) targets meatpacking firms for additional compliance inspections because of the industry's history of injuries. However, MNOSHA's list of meatpacking plants is not complete and should be supplemented with additional data.

The Legislature should address ambiguities in the law and consider alternative approaches to protecting immigrant workers facing dangerous working conditions.

The Legislature should adjust the law to more clearly define the terms "meatpacking" and "native language."

The Legislature could also choose to expand the law. Depending on legislative priorities, it could extend the law's requirements to some nonmeatpacking companies, offer incentives for best practices, or provide additional resources to DLI.

Summary of Agency Response

In a letter dated January 16, 2015, Department of Labor and Industry Commissioner Ken Peterson wrote that the Department appreciated the "candor, advice, and valuable perspective" provided in OLA's evaluation. He stated the Department would implement the report's recommendation to more actively disseminate information about the Packinghouse Workers Bill of Rights. He also said that MNOSHA would adjust its process for targeting meatpacking plants for inspection as recommended in the report.

The full evaluation report, *State Protections for Meatpacking Workers*, is available at 651-296-4708 or: www.auditor.leg.state.mn.us/ped/2015/meatpacking.htm