



Requirements for Processing Wild Game in Minnesota



Overview

The harvesting of wild game in Minnesota for food is an important part of our food system, as well as a tool for managing wild game populations. The regulations for processing of hunter-harvested wild game are very similar to those that address processing of other meat or poultry that will not be sold, but rather is returned to the owner of the animals.

Definitions

Wild Game

Wild game includes big and small game animals and game birds harvested in the wild (not farm-raised), such as deer, fowl, and other species, excluding fish. These animals or parts from them cannot legally be sold as food in Minnesota. ([Minnesota Rules 4626.0020 Subpart 37](#))

Custom Exempt Processing

The processing of meat or poultry for the owner of the animal. These operations are not continuously inspected, and the MDA's meat inspectors only periodically inspect for sanitation compliance. The meat or poultry cannot be sold and can only be consumed by the owner, the owner's household, and the owner's non-paying guests. Custom exempt processed products must be labeled "NOT FOR SALE." ([Minnesota Statutes 31A.02 Subdivision 5](#); [31A.10](#); [31A.15 Subdivision 1](#))

Wild Game Processing

Wild game processing is the additional handling or preparing of field-dressed wild game. This can range from cutting and skinning a carcass, to curing, cooking, or smoking. When performed as a service or a business, wild game processing is considered custom exempt processing and requires a license and permit. (Processing wild game only for yourself or immediate family, household, or hunting party members does not fall in this category.) Wild game products cannot be sold and can only be consumed by the owner, the owner's household, and the owner's non-paying guests. Custom processed wild game must be labeled "NOT FOR SALE." ([Minnesota Statutes 31A.02 Subdivision 5](#); [31A.10](#); [31A.15 Subdivision 1](#))

Continuous Inspection

Inspection that occurs every day during operations to ensure the production of safe and wholesome food. Every animal slaughtered in a continuously inspected establishment must have an ante-mortem and post-mortem inspection by a state or federal inspector. Continuous inspection is required for any meat or poultry processor who wishes to sell their processed products at retail or to other retail outlets, such as grocery stores, restaurants, or other food service institutions. Custom exempt processors, including wild game processors, are NOT under continuous inspection and cannot sell the products they process. ([Minnesota Statutes 31A.03-31A.08](#); [31A.15 Subdivision 1](#))

General Requirements for Processing Wild Game in Minnesota

The MDA Meat Inspection Program has regulatory oversight for wild game processing (as of 8/1/2020). Implementation of licensing and permitting requirements are handled similarly to other custom exempt processors as outlined below.

Licensing

All wild game processors must have a food handler's license with the MDA. Unlicensed processors must become licensed. Only one license is required per food business; the type of license required will depend on the overall nature of the operation. MDA inspectors will help to determine the appropriate license needed. License fees vary but generally start at about \$100.

Permitting

In addition to a food handler's license, wild game processors must have a custom exempt processing permit issued by the MDA Meat Inspection Program. MDA inspectors can help you apply for this permit if you process wild game or conduct other custom exempt operations. There are no fees to obtain this permit.

Inspections

As a custom exempt processor, wild game processors will be inspected on an occasional basis by a local MDA Meat Inspector. Routine inspections are conducted approximately quarterly; however, the frequency of inspections will vary depending on the scale of the operation and the seasonality of the business.

Current Wild Game Processors

The table below summarizes the licensing and permitting requirements. Use this table to determine if your existing operation needs a new license and/or permit.

Description of current operation	License requirement	Permit requirement
Retail exempt operations with wild game processing only	Keep current license	Obtain a custom exempt permit
Retail exempt operations with existing custom exempt and wild game processing	Keep current license	Keep current custom exempt permit
Wild game processors with no other operations	Obtain a custom exempt food handler's license	Obtain a custom exempt permit
Other operations (wholesale/equal to) with wild game processing, but no other custom exempt processing	Keep current license	Obtain a custom exempt permit

(Minnesota Statutes 28A.04 Subdivisions 1 and 2)

What if I am already processing wild game or intend to start processing wild game but don't have the license or permit I need?

Contact the MDA's Dairy and Meat Inspection Division at 651-201-6300. An inspector will be assigned to review your operation and discuss the steps needed to obtain a license and a permit. You and your inspector will work together to make a plan for any needed improvements identified. Processors already operating will be allowed to continue processing wild game as they work toward meeting the requirements.

Why did the regulations for wild game processors change? Are there any benefits to processors?

Previously, the wild game processing facility and operational requirements were similar to those applied to meat products that could be sold; this required that wild game processors maintained a retail food code HACCP plan and met other requirements intended for meat processed for sale. However, because wild game products can only be processed and returned to the owner of the animal, and are not allowed to be sold, wild game processing operations are very similar to traditional custom exempt processing operations. This regulatory change more appropriately applies to the level of food safety risk associated with wild game processing operations, provides more flexibility in meeting the sanitary requirements, and reduces the administrative work needed to comply. In addition, licensed wild game processors now have the option to expand beyond wild game to the custom slaughter and processing of traditional livestock animals for the owners of the animals. Licensed processors are also eligible for the MDA Hunter-Harvested Venison Donation Program, for which they can receive a \$250 sign-up incentive and direct reimbursement of processing costs up to \$150 per deer processed for donation. ([Minnesota Statutes 31A.15 Subdivision 1](#))

Can restaurants, retailers, and other food facilities buy or use wild game from licensed wild game processors?

Products processed at a custom exempt facility, including meat, poultry, and wild game, may not be sold and must be labeled "NOT FOR SALE." These products may not be used in any way in a food facility because they have not been processed under continuous inspection. This is not a change from previous requirements; wild game products were not able to be sold prior to the legislative change. ([Minnesota Statutes 31A.10](#))

Can wild game be donated to food shelves or food pantries?

Typically, custom exempt products cannot be donated because they have not been produced under continuous inspection. However, an exception for the donation of wild game processed at a licensed and permitted custom exempt facility is available to processors participating in the MDA Hunter-Harvested Venison Donation Program. These processors may be reimbursed by the MDA in exchange for processing hunter-harvested venison destined for donation to food banks, food shelves, and feeding programs. ([Minnesota Statutes 17.035, 31A.10, 97A.505 Subdivision 5, 97A.510, 97B.303](#))

For More Information

Starting a Meat and Poultry Processing Business: www.mda.state.mn.us/food-feed/starting-meat-poultry-processing-business

Processor Participation Requirements - Venison Donation Program: www.mda.state.mn.us/food-feed/processor-participation-requirements-venison-donation-program

Additional Resources

Wild Game Laws for Wild Game Processors: www.mda.state.mn.us/sites/default/files/2020-04/Wild%20Game%20Processor%20DNR%20Regulations%20Fact%20Sheet.pdf

Contact Us

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