

Agriculture and agribusinesses have faced a lot of challenges during this pandemic, but we continue to look forward and keep moving as an industry.

As we work on issues related to COVID-19, it is equally important to see where opportunities exist and where we may be able to learn from this pandemic.

We have been working with the legislature on a bill that would allow us to expand meat processing capabilities in the state. As of press time, it is still to be considered, but I am hopeful by the time you are reading this, that it will have been approved.

Under this bill, there would be:

- funding available for workplace development and training for jobs in meat processing facilities,
- loans available for existing meat processing facilities to expand their operations and possibly add shifts,
- and funding available for feasibility studies for new operations in the state.

I am excited about this legislation and I think it is an opportunity to increase capacity at smaller, local processing facilities across the state and look for areas that could support additional facilities that would be beneficial for farms wanting to offer their own meats.

We have seen considerable interest in local meats since the pandemic hit the United States, which has been good news for farmers who have product available. But we understand that the local processing capacity has hit its limit, and demand far exceeds capacity.

I have been told that most state-inspected processing plants are booked through February 2021 already.

We are looking at ways where meat-cutting and food safety training may be able to be offered through community colleges and colleges as part of continuing education curriculum.

This bill is forward-focused and I am pleased it has bi-partisan support. It is important to note that this legislation will be looking to increase capacity in the long-term.

This won't solve issues immediately and it in no way reduces the significant contributions of the large meat processing facilities in the state. Increasing capacity at the local level can help farmers who are looking for custom processing opportunities to meet increased demand.

I have said many times, the food supply system does not switch gears on a dime. We have seen it be flexible in how it markets its products, but we are still learning a lot through this process and consumers are learning more about how their food gets to the table.