

Meat:

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Martin said he's encouraged by Agri Beef's construction of a beef-processing plant in Jerome, Idaho. It's expected to open by the end of 2022, and will have a capacity of about 500 head per day.

"That's a great thing, but I still see the need for more competition," Martin said.

Smaller processing plants would also benefit rural economies by creating jobs, he said.

Increasing competition

Martin said he's encouraged that Attorney General Merrick Garland also participated in the recent virtual meeting.

Martin has been advocating for years to have the U.S. Justice Department investigate what he believes constitutes "price manipulation" in the beef industry.

Matt McElligott, who raises cattle between Haines and North Powder, said he's glad that issues in the beef industry are being acknowledged at the federal level.

"The good thing is that it is being talked about," said McElligott, who is chairman of the public lands committee for the Oregon Cattlemen's Association and president-elect. "It's something we in the industry have been talking about for a long time, the need to have a more vibrant and competitive industry."

McElligott said that although details of the Biden administration's \$1 billion campaign have yet to be determined, a preliminary draft called for spending \$375 million, over two phases, to "jumpstart independent processing" for beef and other meat.

The first phase could include \$150 million earmarked for 15 specific local processing projects, which could potentially help ranchers market beef to local consumers, McElligott said. Prospective processors would compete for the dollars under



Cattle graze in Bowen Valley, just south of Baker City, on Tuesday, Jan. 11, 2022.

Lisa Britton/Baker City Herald

the proposal.

The second phase would designate the remaining \$225 million to expand the capacity at existing processing plants across the nation, he said.

McElligott said boosting independent processing, and thus reducing the dominance of the four leading processing companies, would be beneficial to both ranchers and consumers.

"The more processing you have the more opportunities we have for different markets for the cow-calf producer," he said. "That gives producers more options and it gives consumers more options."

Now, only about 5% of the beef cattle born in Oregon are actually butchered here, McElligott said.

Both he and Martin pointed out that building a processing plant is no small undertaking.

"To say it's complex is an understatement for sure," Martin said.

Complying with federal food safety rules and other regulations is neither simple nor inexpensive, and Martin said he hopes the Biden administration's \$1 billion campaign will also include resources to help potential entrepreneurs negotiate the regulatory labyrinth.

Among other things,



Bennett



Martin



McElligott

he advocates for the federal government to eliminate or streamline regulations that deter people from pursuing regional or local processing plants, and to assign a coordinator to work with prospective owners to help them with all aspects of the endeavor, including financing.

McElligott said a significant obstacle in the industry for ranchers who want to sell beef directly to local customers is that packaged products must be inspected by someone certified by the USDA.

He said he can sell a half of beef "on the hoof" to a neighbor, but not a single pound of packaged hamburger unless it's been inspected.

McElligott said he's encouraged that a draft plan for spending the \$1 billion includes \$100 million to pay overtime to USDA-certified inspectors, which could expand independent processing markets.

Truth in beef labeling

Mark Bennett, a Baker County commissioner who also owns a cattle ranch in the southern part of the county near Unity, agrees with Martin and McElligott that the Biden administration's announcement is promising.

"I think it's a worthy undertaking," Bennett said. "Any time you have concentration it limits competition and the opportunity for innovation. This whole discussion is really crucial."

Bennett said one of the most common topics that come up in his conversations with other ranchers is mandatory country of origin labeling.

Although some meat sold in the U.S., including chicken, is required to be labeled to show where the animal was raised, that's not the case with beef.

Beef can be labeled as a product of the U.S. even if the cattle were raised in another country but were butchered in the U.S.

(Retailers also can include details about where animals were born and raised; they're just not required to do so.)

Ranchers and industry groups have been pushing for beef, which has not been subject to mandatory country-of-origin labeling since 2016, to be reinserted into the labeling law along with chicken and other meats.

"American consumers want to know where their beef comes from," Bennett said.

There has been some interest in Congress in reinstating mandatory labeling for beef. It ended after officials from Mexico and Canada vowed to impose tariffs on American beef if the mandatory labeling continued.

A group of U.S. senators introduced legislation in September 2021 calling for the U.S. trade representative and USDA to come up with a plan to improve beef labeling transparency.

McElligott said country-of-origin labeling "really needs to be addressed."

He pointed out that Americans' demand for beef has continued to grow even with rising retail prices.

He considers this evidence that people recognize the value of beef.

"If you look at everything beef gives you from a nutritional standpoint, it's still an economical part of your plate," McElligott said.

Howe:

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program from the ground up. That program enjoyed some great success and provided students the ability to compete in Future Business Leaders of America at the regional and state level."

The last thing Howe said he was particularly proud of was the increase in test scores from when he arrived until now. Most scores on state and PSAT test, he said, are among the best in the county, state and nation.

He attributed this success to "the dedicated staff who routinely go above and beyond to help students succeed," he said. "They are miracle workers."

Howe said later that his Christian faith is critical to his direction in life.

"I know that several of your readers do not believe in our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, but I do," he told the Chieftain. "He brought me here and I continue to lean on His will for my life. No, I'm not perfect, never will be; He is still working on me."

Howe concluded his resignation letter with a paraphrase from the movie, "Hoosiers."

"I've made some mistakes but they're mistakes I take full responsibility for," Howe wrote. "I was hired to be the principal of Wallowa High School and I've done that to the best of my ability. I apologize for nothing. You may not be pleased with the results, but I am. I am very proud of the high school staff and students."

Violence

Violence also has raised its ugly head, according to Howe's letter.

"Students have threatened my life by shooting me or stabbing me," Howe wrote in his letter. "As a result, I have anxiety about getting in my vehicle after dark. I wonder if there someone waiting to stab or shoot me? I have nightmares about someone standing in my bedroom doorway with a gun. So violent that it

wakes my wife up — I have never had nightmares. The final straw is when I came home from the December board meeting and start yelling at my wife in response to a simple question."

During the interview, he also concluded, "Basically, in my mind, stuff rolls downhill."

Responses?

Superintendent Tammy Jones said she couldn't release the contents of the resignation letter and wouldn't comment on it. Howe did, however, provide a copy to the Chieftain.

"It included names of people that wouldn't be legal according to our attorney," Jones said. "It would violate our board policy on complaints."

She deferred a request for a copy of the letter to board Chairman Woody Wolfe, who deferred the request back to Jones. Board member Matt Howard, who Howe also mentioned in his resignation letter, was unavailable for comment on Jan. 27.

Jones did speak highly of Howe to the Chieftain.

"He loves Wallowa and there isn't a harder worker," she said. "He's passionate about Wallowa and the kids."

She said his resignation comes amid those of others who are retiring or have decided to leave for other reasons, such as the pressures of mandates related to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Others depart

Howe's departure is not the first among Wallowa County school administrators in the past six months.

Enterprise School Superintendent and Elementary School Principal Erika Pinkerton left her post Aug. 30, for a position in La Grande. Sherri Kilgore, Joseph High School principal, left earlier last summer for an elementary school principal's job in Pendleton. Enterprise High School Principal Blake Carlsen resigned Oct. 11, to be effective at the end of 2021. Carlsen would not comment on his reason for leaving or future plans.

ATHLETE OF THE WEEK

SOPHIE MOELLER

Sophie Moeller had a solid weekend for the Wallowa girls basketball team and was the Cougars' leading scorer over two games against Imbler and Pine Eagle — both of which were Wallowa victories. Moeller scored just six points against Imbler, but had a major role on the defensive end in the 41-27 win. A day later, she poured in 22 points and made four 3-pointers in a 52-29 road win against Pine Eagle.

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WALLOWA COUNTY HUMANE SOCIETY

Pet of the Week

MEET MR. WILD CHILD
(Mr. WC for short)

He's been with WC Humane Society or almost a year and is still dreaming of the purrfect fur-ever home. He is a neutered male tuxedo, up-to-date on vaccines, dewormed and is litter box trained. MR. WC will do best in a single person home. If he picks you to love, he loves with his whole heart!

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