

Summary of Input and Feedback on Potential Changes to the MDA Food Licensing Model

The Minnesota Department of Agriculture (MDA) Food and Feed Safety Division is considering improvements to how the MDA structures its food licensing for food manufacturers, distributors, and retailers. The Minnesota Legislature last made major modifications to the MDA food licensing in 2003. In 2024 the MDA initiated a Food Licensing Model project to identify and plan actions to address challenges with current food licensing. The MDA hopes to create a simplified structure that allows businesses to change over time and that better relates to food safety risk. The MDA used input to develop a potential new licensing model, then made adjustments based on feedback. The MDA hired The Improve Group to gather both input and feedback.

Input to inform potential model (Winter-Spring 2024)

Producers, retailers, and people who support the food system (e.g., commercial kitchen operators and technical assistance providers) shared that in general, those with years of experience know how to use the current licensing system. About a third of interviewees said their experience with MDA food licensing has generally been positive and they are clear about how they fit in the license system and what steps they need to take. Other interviewees raised issues with the current model, including understanding which classification and license type fits the business, clearly connecting food safety to license structure, and limitations for innovative and small businesses. Finally, input also identified a need to clarify the coordination and jurisdiction with Tribal Nations that share Minnesota's geography.

With the above input, the MDA developed a potential model with a few license categories: Home Food Processor, Small-Scale Food Handler and Food Handler.

Feedback on potential model

Reacting to the potential model, people affected (food system advocates, farmers and growers, retailers, manufacturers, and wholesalers) said the potential model is simplified and streamlined. In a survey, most respondents said that it would fit their needs and that they see where they would fit. Further, most feedback session participants described that the structure aligns better than the current model with the innovation, flexibility, and variety required of food businesses today. Another theme of sentiments in the feedback process is that the potential structure also relates more clearly to food safety.

A few participants were concerned about the Home Food Processor license and food safety. This category was the focus of additional input to inform further development of allowed activities and standards or requirements for this license category. Those who may potentially pursue this license were supportive and had varied suggestions for what requirements they thought appropriate for this kind of license; many wanted to see further details before the license is launched. Large grocers expressed concerns over this potential new license category, noting they would not sell products made under this license in their stores.

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