

# Senate Energy and Natural Resources Committee

*Max Taylor 271-1403*

**SB 229-FN**, relative to the sale of uninspected bison, red deer, and elk meat.

**Hearing Date:** February 18, 2025

**Time Opened:** 9:03 a.m.

**Time Closed:** 9:17 a.m.

**Members of the Committee Present:** Senators Avard, Pearl, McConkey, Watters and Rosenwald

**Members of the Committee Absent :** None

**Bill Analysis:** This bill allows the sale of uninspected bison, red deer, and elk meat and removes the prospective repeal of the provisions governing the sale of uninspected bison, red deer, and elk meat.

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**Sponsors:**

Sen. Pearl

Sen. Avard

Sen. Innis

Rep. Comtois

Rep. J. Aron

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**Who supports the bill:** Senator Howard Pearl (District 17), Robert Johnson II (NH Farm Bureau), Nick Vailas (Rivervail Farm),

**Who opposes the bill:** None.

**Who is neutral on the bill:** **Michelle Roberge (Chief for Public Health Protection, New Hampshire Department of Health and Human Services), Erica Davis (Administrator for the Food Protection Section, New Hampshire Department of Health and Human Service)**

**Summary of testimony presented in support:**

**Senator Kevin Avard**

**Prime Sponsor, Senate District 12**

- Senator Avard introduced SB 229-FN, explaining that the bill allows the sale of uninspected bison, red deer, and elk meat.
- Removes the prospective repeal of existing provisions governing such sales.
- Senator Avard emphasized that the bill is not complex and straightforward in its intent.

## **Nick Vailas**

### **Rivervail Farm**

- Mr. Vailas owns Rivervail Farm, a bison and elk farm in Errol, NH. The farms has operated for 30 years, with 28 years of bison production and 10 years of elk farming.
- The farm raises animals organically, without hormones or additives, and has seen growing consumer demand for bison and elk meat.
- Currently, the farms sells directly to consumers and restaurants after processing at a state-inspected facility in Colebrook, NH, but is seeking to expand sales to retail stores and co-ops.
- Mr. Vailas emphasized that state inspection ensures safety, despite the meat not being USDA-inspected.
- Senator Avard asked if Rivervail Farms also raises redbtail deer.
  - Mr. Vailas confirmed that Rivervail Farm does raises redbtail deer, which are genetically similar to European elk. Mr. Vailas noted that they live symbiotically with bison, and their grazing habits help maintain pastures.
- Senator Watters asked if the meat was sold to a restaurant, would consumers still see a label indicating it is uninspected.
  - Mr. Vailas stated the restaurant would see the label, but the end consumer would not.
- Mr. Vailas stressed that SB 229-FN would allow greater market access while maintaining state-level food safety standards.
- He stated the bill would help local farms expand sales while providing consumers with more access to locally raised meat.

## **Robert Johnson**

### **New Hampshire Farm Bureau**

- Mr. Johnson clarified that restaurant consumers are informed about uninspected meat, as it is disclosed on the menu.
- Senator Rosenwald asked what the risks associated with handlined uninspected meat would be, noting the various bacteria and parasitic organisms the can be found in contaminated meat.
  - Mr. Johnson agreed that there are risks worth acknowledging but deferred to the New Hampshire Department of Health and Human Services for a more informed response.
- Senator Avard asked if Mr. Johnson believed the meat in question was safe.
  - Mr. Johnson steed the meat is safe and explained the distinction between “amenable species,” which require federal inspection, and “non-amenable species,” such bison, elk, and deer, which do not require federal inspection for sale.
  - He emphasized that the bill allows on-site harvesting, which reduces animal stress and improves meat quality.
  - Mr. Johnson referenced his personal experience raising bison and stated that this law provides significant advantages for farmers.

- Senator Avard asked if the bill could be described as supporting a “farm to table” system, which would avoid multiple processing steps that could introduce contamination.
  - Mr. Johnson stated that SB 229-FN does support a “farm to table” process, emphasizing that the system would provide transparency to consumers.
- Senator McConkey asked if the difficulty in finding FDA-certified processing facilities was a major deterrent for farmers, particularly in Carroll County.
  - Mr. Johnson confirmed that the difficulty in finding FDA-certified processing facilities is a major challenge for farmers.
- Senator McConkey asked if that lack of FDA-certified facilities increased the cost and logistical burden for farms.
  - Mr. Jonson stated that the lack of FDA-certified processing facilities creates transportation challenges for farms, as transporting animals is very costly.

**Senator Howard Pearl  
District 17, Prime Sponsor**

- Senator Pearl expressed his support for the bill, emphasizing its potential to address challenges related to meat processing in New Hampshire.

**Summary of testimony presented in opposition:** None.

**Neutral Information Presented:**

**Michelle Roberge (Chief for Public Health Protection, New Hampshire Department of Health and Human Services) & Erica Davis (Administrator for the Food Protection Section, New Hampshire Department of Health and Human Service)**

- Ms. Roberge and Ms. Davis testified did not take a position on the bill, and were asked to come before the committee to answer questions,
- Senator Avard asked whether the consumption of these meats is safe.
  - Ms. Davis stated that it is safe and the bill would not hinder state inspections.
- Senator Rosenwald asked if proper cooking kills harmful bacteria in raw meat and if there have been cases where handling raw meat has lead to illness.
  - Ms. Davis explained that New Hampshire follows the 2017 Federal Food Code to regulate food handling and inspection.
  - Game meats, including red deer, elk, and bison, have specific handling and cooking requirements under the federal food code.
  - Food establishments must meet strict safety parameters from the moment raw meat enters a facility until it is cooked and served.
  - Ms. Davis noted that cooking meats to the appropriate internal temperature does kill harmful bacteria and parasites. In addition, safe

handling practices such as hand washing and glove use help reduce health risks associated with raw meat.

- Senator Avard asked if handling these game meats is similar to handling raw hamburger.
  - Ms. Davis confirmed that similar procedures are enforced on various meats to ensure the food is safe for consumers.

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Date Hearing Report completed: February 21, 2025