

Debra Viola
Perham

I would like to introduce myself; My name is Debra Viola and my husband Glenn and I have a heritage breed, grass based, livestock farm, with MOFGA certified organic pastures, up in Perham, Aroostook County, Maine. The name of our farm is Fortune Smiles Farmstead, LLC. We bought this farm over 17 years ago, when we still had 8 of our 10 children living at home. Over the years we have worked hard to restore this farm to health and vigor; at great sacrifice and expense, lots of blood, sweat and tears. All these years later it is still a work in progress. We raise cattle, pigs, sheep and some poultry. We take great pride and effort in raising livestock we can be proud of and that brings customers to our door. Our difficulty, is that there are not enough processing facilities nor inspectors to allow our farm and business to thrive and be profitable. We must sell our meats by quarters, halves and wholes, at a cost that does not reflect the care and quality of the product we raise. To be permitted, by law to sell by the cut, we would have to load our livestock up and travel well over 4 hours to a facility where we could have our animals processed and sold commercially in the state. Then we would have to dead head back to the County, return 2 weeks later to pick up and bring back our product, to be sold. How is this system even remotely profitable? It is not; nor can it be, as it stands now. We have a short growing season up here in Aroostook, it is a wild and beautiful land, with some wonderful rolling hills, for pasturing and growing out fine animals on grass. It seems that when people think of the 'County', they think mostly of potatoes, but I am here to report that this is some of the best land around for cattle and sheep. It is an awful situation, when small family farmers do everything possible to raise healthy, hardy livestock and have invested in keeping Maine's open areas, and farmland a viable and valuable resource, and due to circumstances beyond their control, are not able to reap proper compensation for the effort. We built this farm and brought it back from neglect, and our children all helped as they were growing up. The majority went off to college and no longer can imagine returning to the farm and working it. My husband and I are still holding out hope that the major thing, the processing end, that is holding so many farmers up here in the north back, and contributes to their struggling to make their farms successful, on a monetary level, can be addressed and corrected, so that all our family has worked for and towards will continue long into the future. We feel that northern Maine brings much to the State, but somehow the needs of the livestock farmers of this beautiful area, currently are not being addressed. We feel we are left begging for assistance to help us secure our futures, and those of our children. I can see with the right supports, how this region could flourish and could really be the Land of Opportunity and with what our area farmers bring to the table we could help feed the state and then some. This is a rugged land with rugged, strong people and animals that grow well on what we have worked hard to provide for them, we are asking for help here to continue, improve on and keep moving forward. We have 6 months of winter, followed by several weeks of mud-season before our pastures green up. We don't mind the work, we love this life, but we do need our Legislative Body and Maine's Administration to see us. To acknowledge the hard working folks in Aroostook County; and all over the State, and recognize and help us secure, what we need to continue on with the work at hand; feeding the people of Maine and making an honest living. I believe in my heart that if we all do our part, Aroostook County and other places in Maine can thrive and prosper. As an aside, I have lambs that were supposed to go for processing back in November, and due to all the over booking and Covid, we have been pushed back to a date undetermined. I have unhappy customers and lambs that are quite a bit older than is normal for our farm. There are solutions out there and I am hoping that with some brainstorming and thinking outside of the box, answers and support for the situation, so many of us, (livestock farmers) find ourselves in, will be rectified. Thank you for reading through and hopefully hearing me, as I speak for many.