With plants located around Missouri, animal processors supply pork, beef, chicken and other meats to grocery stores, restaurants and consumers. In Missouri, animal processing employment is 1.7 times more concentrated than the U.S. average, with many larger plants producing poultry and pork products. Pandemic-driven meat and poultry consumption changes, along with a tight labor market, have challenged processors’ operations in the past year.

Poultry continues to lead U.S. consumption trends

In terms of meat consumption, Americans consumed more chicken in 2021 than other meat products. Estimates suggest chicken consumption per capita averaged nearly 96 pounds, and 2022 projections show an expected increase in chicken consumption; see chart. 

During 2021, beef ranked second in per capita consumption at 58 pounds, but over the past two decades beef consumption has declined while chicken has grown in popularity. Pork consumption, which averaged 50 pounds per capita in 2021, held fairly steady in the past two decades.
Pork has had lower per capita consumption in the U.S., but of U.S. animal product exports in 2021, pork is expected to represent the largest share at 26%. Although beef has lost some ground in U.S. consumption, beef exports to countries such as China, Japan and South Korea have grown.

**Production challenges**

The pandemic did not dampen overall meat demand, but it did require processors to alter their products to serve the changing needs of restaurants, grocery stores and online buyers. Additionally, a tightening labor market has slowed production as companies struggle to keep workers.

In 2020, Missouri processors paid their workers $46,600 — less than the average rate paid in six out of eight surrounding states. Relatively low average pay helps Missouri compete for new processors or encourages existing processors to expand, but it can also make it harder to attract and retain workers in a tight labor market. Smaller processors often need skilled meat handlers and butchers. These workers take time to train, in part because they must learn how to process a variety of animals including cattle, swine, lamb and deer. Larger operations can employ entry-level workers for many jobs but also require specialized mechanical or technical employees to handle or maintain automated or complex processing activities. To help with this issue, two mobile training centers will be available in 2022 as an MU Extension pilot program to train workers in meat processing. The program is funded by the Missouri Department of Agriculture.

**Sources**

2. Per capita consumption from the Livestock Marketing Information Center, which compiled data from the USDA National Agricultural Statistics Service and Economic Research Service.
4. Export growth from 2015-21 from USDA Livestock, Dairy, and Poultry Outlook: November 2021, LDP-M-329. A newly announced processing facility in Warren County, Missouri, will add substantial beef processing capacity to the state in years to come.
5. Missouri Food, Agriculture and Forestry Workforce Needs Assessment, University of Missouri Extension, July 2020.