

Meat & Greet

**By Reg P. Wydeven
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A few years ago my buddies and I went to Buffalo Wild Wings for lunch. I had a bacon cheeseburger and a side of chicken wings. The meal was delicious, despite the fact that three different animals had to contribute to it. That's why Lent is a particularly hard time of year for me.

As Catholics, we abstain from eating meat on Ash Wednesday and Fridays during Lent. Obviously, I love meat. And since I'm not a huge fan of fish or eggs and my wife and son are allergic to peanut butter, abstaining from meat is an effective sacrifice for me.

On the first Friday after Lent, I look forward to lunch with my work friends where I can enjoy a burger once more. But this year, because of the impending government sequester, Lent may not end – and it may not be limited to Fridays.

Two years ago when we reached the debt ceiling, Congress passed the Budget Control Act of 2011, which raised the debt ceiling by \$2.1 trillion, but required a corresponding equal deficit reduction. The Act included \$917 billion in cuts and created the Joint Select Committee on Deficit Reduction, which was tasked with cutting the remaining \$1.2 trillion over 10 years.

However, if the Committee failed to make the necessary cuts timely, then a sequestration, or cut in government spending, would be put in place. Because the committee didn't succeed, the first cuts of \$42.7 billion are set to start March 1, 2013. The White House Office of Management and Budget is responsible for deciding which defense and non-defense programs, projects or activities get the cuts. The Sequestration Transparency Act of 2012 requires the President to submit a report on the potential cuts triggered by sequestration.

In addition to soldiers, teachers, park rangers and other employees who rely on government funding, U.S. Department of Agriculture Secretary Tom Vilsack fears members of his agency will also be affected. First on the chopping block: furloughing meat inspectors.

In a letter to the American Meat Institute, Vilsack wrote, "Unfortunately, unless Congress acts to prevent sequestration, FSIS [the Food Safety and Inspection Service] will have no choice but to furlough its employees in order stay within the budget Congress has given it."

Anticipating the budget cuts, the AMI warned Vilsack in its own letter that inspector furloughs "would have a profound, indeed devastating, effect on meat and poultry companies, their employees, and consumers, not to mention the producers who raise the cattle, hogs, lamb, and poultry processed in those facilities." Farm Futures, a trade publication, predicted that without inspectors to examine meat and poultry, farmers couldn't sell it and could go out of business.

I've started praying that I learn to how to hunt.