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Farmers' markets will not be hit with new food laws: Rural concerns

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TORONTO - The long arm of the Ontario government will not be reaching into farmers' markets this summer to impose tough new food regulations on everything from the moisture content of honey to the number of bathrooms available on site.

Health Minister George Smitherman said yesterday that public health officials will instead concentrate on providing educational booklets and other food-handling information to market vendors this summer.

Faced with what he described as "concern" from rural Ontario, Mr. Smitherman announced that the proposed regulations will be put on hold pending further consultation, and that markets will also be exempted from the current regulation governing their operation.

Regulation 562 "lumps farmers' markets in with restaurants and others," Mr. Smitherman told reporters. "There's a view that it needs to be reviewed, but we think for the purposes of the 2006 farmers' market season, that it is very, very appropriate that public health units be given the resources that they need to proactively work with education and to inform people of risks and to mitigate against them."

Conservative MPP Bob Runciman applauded the decision, observing that "common sense prevails apparently.

"It was wrong-headed from the outset. It didn't make sense and it was an attack on the tradition of this province. I'm thankful that they saw the light and that we don't have to continue this battle," he said.

Robert Chorney, president of the 124-member Farmers' Markets Ontario, described the Health Minister's move as "positive." Mr. Chorney said his organization worked with health officials to develop a 46-page draft document outlining new regulations for everything from lab tests for homemade jelly to courses about food handling for farmers and merchants.

The idea was to establish consistent rules to be used across the province by public-health inspectors. However, when details of the proposed changes appeared in media reports on the weekend, "there was a lot of upset out there, people thinking this was carved in stone when it wasn't at all," Mr. Chorney said.

The new exemption will not mean farmers' markets are completely unregulated because other basic public health provisions will still apply, said David Spencer, a spokesman for Mr. Smitherman.

"If someone eats something and gets sick and makes a complaint [to the local health unit], there is still the capacity during the summer for the public health unit to investigate and take action."