

May 17, 2006 Wednesday

Farmers' markets face new rules on hygiene

BYLINE: Rob Ferguson, Toronto Star

SECTION: NEWS; Pg. A01

LENGTH: 671 words

Farmers' markets could be pushed out of business under new health regulations being developed by the Ontario government, critics warn.

The regulations on everything from handwashing facilities to how the markets are run and food is prepared are well-intentioned but "onerous and convoluted," says Wayne Senior, a veterinarian and egg farmer who runs the farmers' market in Carp, near Ottawa.

"We have to sit down to get practical solutions," he told the Star last night, echoing concerns from others in the field.

Health Minister George Smitherman said the government is determined to "modernize" regulations and standardize a patchwork quilt of enforcement by local inspectors at farmers' markets under existing laws across the province.

But he added the 1 million Ontarians who spend an estimated \$645 million at 125 farmers' markets shouldn't worry because close consultations with markets and their vendors will take place over the summer.

New regulations will also be developed for church suppers, where meals are often prepared on a potluck basis, and similar community events.

"We're not interested in anything that causes challenges to the operation of farmers' markets. Everybody loves them," said Smitherman, noting regulations won't be finalized until the fall.

The intent is to give market vendors guidelines to help prevent food-borne illness that can arise from improper sanitation or food handling that isn't hot or cold enough, especially with more markets selling meals.

"There are genuine risks that need to be well-managed but we think it can be done on a pro-active, educational basis," added Smitherman. "Enforcement should be a last resort."

Some of the guidelines mirror recommendations from a 2003 investigation into the quality of meat inspection and regulation in Ontario by Justice Roland Haines. Still, the health ministry has 48 pages of regulations and that makes some observers nervous.

"It's a heavy-handed government trying to solve a problem that doesn't exist," said Progressive Conservative MPP Bob Runciman, who called the measures an attack on rural Ontario and church groups.

Requirements include keeping logs detailing temperatures at which food products were cooked and food-handling certificates, he said. "They want them to meet the same requirements that are applied to a restaurant or grocery store."

Runciman said he's not aware of any health problems from farmers' market food sales. Health ministry officials did not return two calls from the Star yesterday requesting details of any health scares or problems.

That makes Senior wonder what all the fuss is about.

"To have an effective food-safety program I think you have to know what you're fighting," said Senior.

Dr. Sheela Basrur, the province's chief medical officer of health, declined a request for interviews with her or experts on her staff yesterday.

The draft regulations have been developed by ministry staff working with an umbrella group called Farmers' Markets Ontario, headed by executive director Robert Chorney of Brighton, but it appears there is a split between that group and people like Senior.

"We're not feeling threatened" by the proposals, Chorney said yesterday.

"We're not fools. It's our business."

He credited the ministry for backing down already on plans to require mechanized refrigeration of food, instead of coolers with ice, as long as temperatures are below the required 4 C .

Senior said Chorney's group doesn't understand concerns that regulations calling for new responsibilities for market managers - often busy farmers and vendors - are too stringent for small producer-run markets where everything is done by volunteers.

Among other things, the managers would be required to submit names of vendors for the season to public health inspectors by March 1 so they can be screened by public health authorities.

Other concerns include regulations for handwashing facilities, with guidelines calling for hot and cold running water if food is being cooked but requiring only tepid water if food is being reheated.

Copyright 2006 Toronto Star Newspapers, Ltd.