

May 18, 2006 Thursday

## Farmers hail 'return to sanity'

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**SECTION:** NEWS; Pg. A04

**LENGTH:** 607 words

Farmers and shoppers are claiming victory after Health Minister George Smitherman suddenly backed down for now from plans to slap new health regulations on farmers' markets and church suppers.

The regulatory effort, detailed in yesterday's Toronto Star, was scrapped after farmers warned the changes could force their markets out of business and readers flooded the Star's website with criticisms.

"What's next?" wrote Jim Detenbeck of Mississauga. "Locking up grandma over some church sale cookies?"

Smitherman went one step further than axing the new regulations, saying he'll ask Premier Dalton McGuinty's cabinet to exempt farmers' markets from 1990 rules subjecting them to the same public health standards as restaurants and grocery stores.

That move will come next week.

"It's some degree of a return to sanity," said Merle Bowes, a certified organic vegetable farmer who lives near Carleton Place, outside Ottawa, and makes his living by selling at three farmers' markets.

Smitherman's new plan will have public health staff taking educational booklets prepared by the health ministry to vendors at the province's 125 farmers' markets to make sure they're aware of the best ways to prevent food-borne illness.

"Certainly no one's after the farmers' markets," Smitherman said yesterday afternoon, calling them an "important institution" with deep roots in society.

The outcry from farmers and the public played a major role in the decision to back down, added Smitherman, who also backed down from plans to ban the use of fresh raw fish in sushi after a public outcry in 2004.

"We take those concerns seriously ... it was appropriate to stand down."

Another reason for the flip-flop is that Liberal backbenchers, especially from rural areas, were feeling the heat from their constituents over the plan, said Progressive Conservative MPP Bob Runciman (Leeds-Grenville).

"It was wrong-headed from the outset," said Runciman.

"It was an attack on the traditions of this province. I'm thankful they saw the light."

Smitherman said he hasn't ruled out modernizing regulations in the future with input from farmers and health officials, but hasn't set a deadline.

"I'm not going to do anything, certainly, until or unless there's agreement among the parties that the model we're developing together is of benefit to the long-term survival of farmers' markets."

One of the problems in the proposed guidelines, developed with input from an umbrella group called Farmers' Markets Ontario, was that not all farmers agreed with the group, Smitherman acknowledged.

A woman who organizes community suppers in the hamlet of Forfar, near Smiths Falls, said she was happy to hear Smitherman is also backing off plans to regulate church suppers and similar events, where folks often bring food on a pot-luck basis.

"Our thought was it was going to destroy the little communities with strawberry socials," said Marion Stone of the local Women's Institute, noting "we haven't poisoned anyone yet."

Smitherman had hoped to modernize the regulation governing farmers' markets because of inconsistent enforcement of public health rules across the province.

Farmers complained that inspectors in some locations interpreted those regulations more strictly than others, prohibiting the sale of things like baked goods and preserves.

That's why farmers' markets will now be exempt, Smitherman suggested.

"As long as the regulation stands ... apparently some people can't get past it."

The health ministry was unable to cite any specific examples of illnesses or deaths caused by foods purchased at farmers' markets.

But officials have said they believe there have been cases in the past.

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