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FARM MARKETS CATCH BREAK; GRITS GRANT EXEMPTION FROM STRICT HEALTH RULES

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Ontario farmers' markets will be exempted from public health regulations that threatened their livelihood, Health Minister George Smitherman announced yesterday.

The government is also slowing down plans to bring in a new regulatory regime that would have meant strict new rules for markets, church suppers, strawberry socials and other country customs.

Smitherman acknowledged the public health initiative was causing concerns around the province.

"We're very interested in creating a consensus around this," the minister said. "And we think that if we take a step back and give a little more time that we can create that."

Smitherman said he will exempt farmers' markets from an existing regulation that groups them with supermarkets and restaurants. The exemption will be in place for this summer season.

"Farmers markets need to make hay while the sun shines, so to speak," he said.

Instead, public health officials will spend the summer educating vendors about how to ensure their product is safe for human consumption.

Conservative MPP Bob Runciman said common sense finally appears to have prevailed under intense pressure from members of the public who value farmers' markets.

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