

BC's New Provincial Meat Inspection Regulations

Everyone is talking about it. The folks up in Smithers, BC staged a "Funeral for the Family Farm" complete with a horse drawn carriage, coffin, piper & drummer. Farmers soon to be out-of-business followed with customers and supporters behind them. So, what is it all about and how does it affect us?

In light of the BSE (mad cow) scare and the Avian flu epidemic, our government felt something was needed to guarantee the safety of BC's meat. In September 2004, the Province of BC enacted a new Meat Inspection Regulation (MIR) under the Food Safety Act that states all abattoirs (slaughterhouses) must be either provincially or federally licensed by September 30th 2007. Prior to this, about 5% of meat sold to the BC public was slaughtered in unlicensed facilities that were approved and inspected, as needed, by Environmental Health Officers. Many of these unlicensed abattoirs were 4th or 5th generation and never been questioned about their food safety. In fact, the demand for local meat has only increased, along with other direct-marketed farm products.

Under the new MIR, ranchers and producers that were unlicensed abattoirs who continue to raise animals for slaughter, and are not near one of the 30 or so licensed abattoirs left in the province, will now have to transport their animals long distances, causing undue stress to the animal (think Bella Coola to Vanderhoof: 13 hours) and incur additional costs that will reduce their profit or increase the price for the consumer.

After last year's slaughter, many producers across the province stopped raising animals for food. Even with the government's offer to pay up to \$50,000 towards the cost of the upgrade, the total cost of an upgrade can be \$125,000 or more. Many producers cannot upgrade simply because consumers will not pay 3-5 times more for the same product. This will decrease the amount and variety of meat available at the farm gate and/or farmers' markets.

Folks are saying there wasn't any consultation, that inspectors aren't familiar with small to medium scale operations, that the Ministry is only thinking of free-trade, that they're trying to impose Wal-mart-sized regulations on little corner stores, that the cost of upgrading facilities to meet the new requirements have forced many abattoirs out of business, and at large abattoirs, there is no guarantee that meat returned to a producer is from the same animal sent in.

The BC Food Systems Network is a diverse group of organizations, and farmers, nutritionists, Aboriginal peoples, chefs, and more, formed eight years ago to link people from across the province involved in community-level action related to food. They are well known for their annual Sorrento gathering. This group sent a "Critique and Recommendations" to the government in 2004 and, again, have re-stated their requests this fall. They say pressure from the public is needed in order to have these recommendations considered.

For more information or to have your voice heard, please visit FarmFolk/CityFolk's website at www.farmfolkcityfolk.ca



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