



Fast

# FACTS

CANADIAN CENTRE FOR POLICY ALTERNATIVES - MANITOBA

there is an alternative.

September 10, 2013

## The Two Faces of Government Policy Towards Local Food

**S**mall farm owners Pam and Clint Cavers were blindsided on August 28, 2013 when Manitoba Agriculture, Food and Rural Initiatives (MAFRI) staff showed up to “seize and destroy” their locally produced and cured prosciutto (pork).

Ironically, just months ago, MAFRI presented the Cavers with \$10,000, naming their prosciutto the “Best New Food Product” in the Great Manitoba Food Fight competition.

Pam Cavers neatly summed up the Province’s approach to supporting local food, “With one hand they giveth and the other they taketh away.”

It’s not hard to see why family farmers feel that policy towards local food is two faced. Unfortunately, as dramatic the Cavers story is, it is not an isolated incident. It reflects a much deeper problem – the marriage of government to industrial agriculture to the detriment of family farmers.

In my doctoral research, I interviewed farm families who sell meat directly to consumers in Western Canada and the USA. Most farmers wanted to expand and innovate but were frustrated and stymied by the many barriers they face.

Most often, farmers cited the cost and accessibility of processing facilities. Some farmers had considered establishing their own facilities. But the regulations are geared towards large industrial plants, creating huge costs for smaller processors.

For example the Cavers were told they needed separate facilities to handle all aspects of their cured meats, which would mean extensive renovations, and the addition of buildings and expensive equipment. They argued that these costs were unreasonable considering their scale. The total value of their stock, developed and aged over three years, was \$8,000. Just one piece of equipment they were being asked to buy would have cost them \$8,000.

Everyone agrees that food safety regulations are important. However, smaller farmers and processors want regulations to consider the relative risk of different size operations - “scale-appropriate regulations.”

Risk management is based on the formula: Risk = (Probability of Occurrence) multiplied by the (Impact of Occurrence). The most obvious argument for different regulations for smaller operations is that the potential impact of an outbreak from mega-processors is much greater. Look no further than the Maple Leaf Listeria outbreak in 2008 and XL Beef e-coli outbreak in 2012 for evidence.

In the XL beef incident, at least 18 fell ill, thousands of pounds of meat wasted and it took months to determine where the tainted food had been sold. This cost \$16 to \$27 million and damaged public confidence in Canadian meat.

Is the Manitoba government serious about

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local food? Many farmers say that, while front line MAFRI staff people are helpful, they are woefully underfunded.

When it comes to photo ops, the government program money is there. Just look at the MAFRI Buy Manitoba program. Framed as opportunity to help farmers develop local markets. Yet it has primarily helped large grocery chains to label products that were manufactured in Manitoba.

Sure, some legitimately Manitoban companies were supported. But, we also see Coke-a-Cola labeled with a Buy Manitoba logo. Once again, a program was coopted by big industry yet most family farmers, like the Cavers, receive almost no benefit.

Then there is MAFRI's Open Farm Day. Farmers host consumers to promote their products and educate the public about farming. Again, a great photo op for the Minister. However, former Open Farm Day participant, Dwayne Logan, aptly criticized that the program gives the public an unrealistic view of agriculture as idyllic.

Thus, MAFRI holds up small family farms as the face of agriculture. Yet provides minimal financial support and even undermines small farmers with one-size fits all regulation.

Incidents like the one at Harborside farms are driving farmers underground, making it difficult for consumers to find authentic local food. If we are serious about local food, we must demand that government create more appropriate programs and regulations.

We can look elsewhere to see that there are ample but unrealized opportunities for our government to nurture the local food economy. Three years ago, farmers and consumers united to successfully lobby for scale-appropriate regulation that is now enabling local food in the state of Oregon. Readers may be interested in learning about the grassroots efforts of the Friends of Family Farmers in Oregon to learn about their efforts to change legislation to support

family farms. Check out their website [www.friendsoffamilyfarmers.org](http://www.friendsoffamilyfarmers.org) to watch a short video about this process. Their efforts are a testament to the power when consumers rally to support family farmers

We need to move beyond the photo ops here in Manitoba and government must listen to what farmers need and what the public wants in order to provide good, clean healthy food to Manitobans.

Indeed, this is why we have established "The Real Manitoba Food" fight campaign, which has brought citizens together first to petition the government to work with farmers and consumers to create programs, procedures and policies that better support the development of local food systems in the Province. Visit [www.realmnitobafoodfight.ca](http://www.realmnitobafoodfight.ca) to learn more about the campaign and the issues.

*Colin Anderson is a PhD student and instructor at the University of Manitoba investigating direct farm marketing and cooperatives in Western Canada and the USA. He was present at the Cavers farm during the MAFRI raid and is involved in an effort to petition the government to address the regulatory barriers that constrain the local food economy.*

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