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FACTS

CANADIAN CENTRE FOR POLICY ALTERNATIVES – MANITOBA

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Small Scale Food Report is food for thought

Public demand to buy food directly from farmers is growing. In Manitoba the government response has been slow and the regulatory hurdles are discouraging. The recent release of *Advancing the small scale, local food sector in Manitoba* is a first step but farmers are asking if it will really make any difference.

Many farmers are willing to sell a side of beef, a few dozen eggs or a bag of potatoes to their acquaintances. Indeed, farmers have been direct marketing since agriculture began. At one time, governments encouraged them in the art of safe food production and processing, for example some remember that 4H lesson on how to properly butcher a chicken for sale. At one time, farm direct sales accounted for a significant percentage of food purchases. Many citizens knew their farmer.

Then came the agribusiness revolution and farmers were encouraged to abandon their small enterprises and specialize to fill commodity markets. Citizens became consumers and within two generations the social link between table and farm was broken.

Now, corporate grocery stores rule the food system with a massive, complicated and expensive network of middlemen who ensure a constant supply of every food imaginable, in and out of season. In order to keep this food as cheap as possible, efficiencies must be found and corners cut. Citizens have gradually noticed that, although food is plentiful, the quality and taste have changed. Occasional food recalls and stories of factory

conditions have contributed to a general worry about industrial food quality. Consumers grumble and keep going to the grocery store anyway, but a growing number of citizens are seeking their food directly from farms.

Some farmers are answering the demand. Direct food sales at the farmgate and farmers markets are expanding. Networks are developing to streamline sales, the internet and word of mouth are used. Governments jump on the bandwagon and proclaim their support for local foods, however little support is provided for small local food producers.

Other farmers do not see selling food to a neighbor as marketing and can not believe that anyone could make a living that way. They have bought into the idea that bigger is better and taken it one step further to believe that smaller is bad. This type of thinking has led to the commodity associations, which represent farmers' also adopting the notion that small farms are inferior. These commodity associations are the lobby groups to government who advance regulations that ignore the needs of small scale food producers and actively discourage farmgate sales and farmers' markets.

When challenged, government and commodity associations talk about food safety. A look at the regulations show that many have nothing to do with food safety and everything to

there is an alternative.

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do with making small farms disappear. International traceability, export protocols, food sizing, fancy packaging, double washrooms, double signatures and paved parking lots are not necessary when the farm is small and the consumer can question the farmer directly.

Governments have mandated commodity associations to focus on expanding export markets with no focus on small-scale food. Small producers continued to operate until attention was drawn to these issues when a popular farm was first commended by government and then raided and fined by over a regulation technicality. The resulting public furor was loud and long. When faced with public outrage, a government's strongest defense is to commission a report.

The people selected for the Small Scale Food Manitoba Working Group included three small scale direct marketing farmers. Five were staff from associations representing heavy weights like Parmalat, Maple Leaf Foods and Canada's biggest egg conglomerate, Burnbrae Farms. Chair Wayne Lees should be commended for making an extraordinary attempt to advance the small scale local food sector in the report the group produced: *Advancing the small scale, local food sector in Manitoba: a path forward*. Many of the recommendations are welcome.

The Report estimates about three percent of Manitoba food is sold directly from a farmer at the farmgate or farmers' market. It then suggests that this market share could be grown to 10 percent by 2020. If direct marketing is seen to be in direct competition with commodity agriculture and industrial operators see 10 percent as the difference between profit and loss, will they be willing to give up a share of their market?

One recommendation in particular has made direct marketing farmers wonder if the consultation was futile. The report recommends that small scale food producers create their own association

and use it, not to lobby government, but rather to work inside the other, larger associations. Small producers are busy and do not have the capacity currently to create such an organization and the report offers no ideas for funding. Furthermore, the report does not acknowledge the power imbalances inherent in these struggles for share of the agricultural market.

The report recommends that associations "foster a diversity of production methods" and recognize small scale producers "as legitimate members of the commodity group". The report then goes on to call for "a collaborative, inclusive context among the existing boards, small scale specialty producers, government policy analysts and consumers." Small farmers are understandably sceptical that large associations can make these changes given the vested interest of commodity associations in the status quo.

Is collaboration possible? In the past, government labelled small farms as inferior, mandated commodity associations to replace small farms in favour of export oriented industrial production system and gave them a virtual monopoly. Now the associations are being asked to embrace diversity and give up a piece of their market.

Public support for small farms is strong and getting stronger. As the report points out, commodity associations "have been granted a social license to provide a predictable supply of food to the public." But the growing popularity of small scale food and farmers' markets is a sign that the public wants more. The question is, what will governments do to make a real place for small scale producers at the table?

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