

C R – F A I R

Capital Region Food and Agriculture Initiatives Roundtable

Bringing about positive change in the food and agriculture system in the Capital Region

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MEMO

TO: All MLAs
CC: BC Institute of Agrologists, Certified Organic Associations of BC Livestock Caucus, Community Nutritionists Council of BC, Medical Health Officers, Provincial Health Officer, Signatories
DATE: April 19, 2004
RE: **Food safety where art thou? BSE, avian flu and meat inspection**

Meat production: a systems view

BSE and avian flu, two potent examples of food-borne disease, are linked to the way we produce and process meat. The **system** is designed to maximize production and minimize cost. The result is large numbers of very few animal species concentrated in one region, in confined spaces, and fed artificially enhanced diets – conditions that are conducive to the rapid spread of diseases like avian flu.

This “efficient” system for the production of cheap food has hidden costs. Now we see some of the costs of addressing the avian flu outbreak in the Fraser Valley: interruption of almost all of BC’s poultry and egg production; compensation to the affected farmers; killing and disposing of millions of birds.

We argue that to more effectively minimize food-borne disease in meat production and processing, we need small- and medium-scale operations in many regions as well as large-scale operations in one region. Decentralization and diversity will make meat animals, farm and food businesses, and local economies stronger. Further centralization and control, the approach favoured by the proposed Meat Inspection Regulation, will actually **reduce** farm and food safety.

Community-based food security

CR-FAIR is part of the BC community-based food security movement. It is a coalition of farm and food businesses, NGOs and government agencies in the Capital Region. Our interests include protecting the safety and security of local food systems and economies. Other regions of BC share our concerns.

The proposed Meat Inspection Regulation

We agree with Ministers Hansen and van Dongen that the BSE (Mad Cow) discovery in Alberta, and the avian flu crisis, have highlighted the importance of protecting the safety of our meat supply, and that we need uniform meat inspection requirements across BC.

Unfortunately, the draft Meat Inspection Regulation fails to address the BSE issue and unnecessarily threatens vital local agricultural economies and jobs. It could result in loss of tremendous potential growth for BC’s tourism, hospitality, and restaurant businesses.

BSE can be identified only by analysis of brain tissue. The proposed inspections are inadequate for that purpose, so the BSE issue will remain unaddressed under the Regulation.

Local economies will suffer because the Regulation, as proposed, is far too costly for a very large proportion of BC’s small- and medium-scale meat producers and processors. The Regulation is suitable only for large-scale centralized establishments. These are incapable of addressing the needs of local small- and medium-scale farmers, purveyors and restaurants.

The safety of meat begins with how animals are raised. Small- and medium-scale producers tend to grow their animals under less concentrated and therefore less stress- and disease-prone conditions than larger-scale producers. Thus their animals’ feed requires fewer sub-therapeutic antibiotics and fewer high-protein supplements (which can include animal byproducts and lead, potentially, to BSE). Certified Organic operators, for example, are not allowed to use any synthetic chemical inputs and are required to provide humane and healthy conditions for their livestock.

The same scale issues apply at the slaughter and processing end of the chain. In large-scale centralized establishments, the volumes and associated speed of processing pose hazards to animals, workers, and the meat. These hazards do not apply in small-scale, hands-on operations. With local slaughtering, animals are not transported long distances, thus reducing their stress levels and enhancing meat quality.

Small- and medium-scale agricultural producers throughout BC play a large role in maintaining critical agricultural infrastructure, in providing local jobs in production and processing, and in supplying local restaurants, retailers, and consumers with a wide

variety of high quality, safe, ethically produced food, for which there is ever-increasing consumer demand. Local small- and medium-scale meat establishments are integral to these local food systems.

Policy recommendations

We recommend a Meat Inspection Regulation with the following characteristics to appropriately address all scales of meat slaughter and processing:

1. Proper slaughter and processing establishments: * health and safety regulations **suitable for small- and medium-sized establishments**, including on-farm and mobile facilities
2. Trained and certified abattoir operators:
 - somebody certified in and responsible for food safety on site during all operating hours
 - local training programs available – possibly through local colleges
3. Trained and certified meat inspectors
4. Monitoring (quarterly? as well as unannounced) of meat by government-certified meat inspectors throughout slaughter and processing
5. Inspection of slaughter and processing establishments (quarterly? as well as unannounced)
6. Complete traceability and accountability for all slaughtered and processed meat
7. BSE protection:
 - elimination of all animal byproducts from animal feeds
 - development of a government facility for the testing of all slaughtered cattle for BSE
 - appropriate tissue samples from all cattle to be sent to the facility and tested for BSE
8. Provincial audit of the meat inspection process: occasional review of the meat inspection process to ensure food safety and industry viability

** Note: "establishment" means any abattoir, slaughter house, packing house or other premises in which animals are slaughtered, or in which portions or products thereof are prepared for food, or are stored.*

Adoption of such recommendations and consultation with affected meat businesses can quickly lead to improved food safety, stronger agri-food infrastructure and healthier local economies. A more decentralized, fully traceable meat production and processing system is possible. Among other benefits, it would permit isolation of problem areas in future disease outbreaks. Instead of commodities being wiped out for the whole province, one region could come to the aid of another.

For further information, contact:
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What you can do

1. Request a delay in Cabinet approval of the Regulation until impacts on regional, small- and medium-scale meat businesses can be assessed and publicly reported and the Regulation adjusted to address them.
2. Consider use of a Select Standing Committee (Legislative Initiatives?) to achieve this.
3. Seek further information about meat inspection and meat businesses in your constituency, and review the issues (see Resources below).

Resources

- Collected regional concerns: www.bcfarmnet.org
- CR-FAIR's 2004 assessment of local food security: www.communitycouncil.ca, under What's New
- *Growing Green* Project policy recommendations re processing: www.ffcf.bc.ca/GrowingGreen.html
- Community-based food security in BC: BC Food Systems Network at www.fooddemocracy.org
- National Farmers' Union, 2002. The Farm Crisis, Bigger Farms at www.nfu.ca
- Council of Canadians' Beyond Factory Farming Coalition www.beyondfactoryfarming.org

The following resources are U.S.-based and show the extent of factory farming issues and concerns there:

- Fast Food Nation. Eric Schlosser. 2001.
- Video re meat production: www.themeatrix.com
- Recent PBS special Modern Meat at www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/shows/meat/

Signatories

Member organizations of CR-FAIR:

BC Government and Service Employees' Union
GroundWorks Learning Centre
Growing Green Project
LifeCycles Project Society
Small Scale Food Processor Association
TLC The Land Conservancy

Representatives on CR-FAIR Steering Committee:

Ministry of Agriculture, Food and Fisheries
Vancouver Island Health Authority

And

BC Food Systems Network * Council of Canadians * Beyond Factory Farming * Direct Farm Marketing Association (SVI) * District A Farmers' Institutes * FarmFolk/CityFolk * Healthy Eating Active Living Project * Island Farmers' Alliance * Kamloops Food Policy Council * Kelly Creek Organic Producers * Northern Health Authority Medical Officer of Health * Peninsula Agriculture Commission * Powell River Agricultural Association * Powell River Womens' Institute * Slow Food Vancouver Island