

Market Trends



Enough talk about farmer's markets, let's see some action!

Farmer's markets have been one of the most successful vehicles for getting local produce to customers, but rapid changes have to be made by farmers, consumers, and—most importantly—governments at all levels to keep up this momentum.

Apparently some governments are beginning to understand this. In June the Ontario government announced a \$4 million funding program to help make local food available through both on-farm sales and at Ontario farm markets. It is part of \$56 million to be spent over the next four years to support local initiatives (more information at: www.omafra.gov.on.ca/english/infores/releases/2008/062408.htm)

Before we get too excited, however, let's look at the other issues. Are food safety regulations being adjusted to fit the scale of the operation? No, for the most part they are absent from these discussions. (A notable exception has been in B.C. where the sale of fresh farm eggs at farmer's markets is now legal. And—surprise, surprise—did you know it's legal to sell wine at farmer's markets in New Brunswick?)

In B.C., it took a near riot on Saltspring Island and a face-to-face meeting with farm market managers, B.C. Ministry of Agriculture folks and Health regulators to decide that, yes indeed, farmers should be able to sell clean, ungraded eggs at their local farm markets. This was a battle that has raged for over 30 years in B.C. and remains unsettled throughout Canada.



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Selling meat at farm markets is also quite an interesting and different experience across the country and is by no means easy for producers. Yet we continue to ratchet up the health requirements for our own meat processing to the extent that smaller producers are just giving up as they cannot afford the costs.

If we are serious about having more locally produced food in our communities, I think it is time for a rational approach to regulating the sale of these foods. We should be able to create commonsense regulations and procedures that will allow for our own producers to sell their products to us.

Then there is the question of infrastructure. There are many studies that demonstrate how a vibrant farmer's market can revitalize an urban core. Additionally, we now also have volumes of information on the obesity and health issues related to the lack of healthy food in our

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diet. We also have the studies that show quite simply there is not enough healthy food available in these urban cores.

One would think, since we know all of these things, that regional and city governments would be clambering over each other to build multi-use facilities in urban cores that can accommodate healthy farmer's markets. So far, sadly, that is not the case. How about as a bare minimum having a covered parking structure with electricity, running water and washrooms that can serve other uses as simple as generating parking revenues during non-market days?

Finally and most importantly, there is the issue of getting farmers to farmer's markets in these days of higher and higher fuel prices. At the majority of markets, the farmer, or a member of the farm family, or a fulltime employee, is the only one allowed to sell that farm's product. That one rule is a serious problem for many farms since, in order to survive, they may be selling at three, or as many as six, different markets every week.

Who do you think is growing the crops, or looking after the animals while they stand in a market for all those hours? What about the fuel costs for all five trucks going to all five markets?

We are now seeing a new movement at markets to allow producers to get together as a group and sell each other's products. That means five farmers could sell a complete range of products at five different markets but only have to appear once per week. This is proving successful in several larger markets and, while it requires serious oversight and management, it is an example of the type of forward-thinking changes we need.

A final thought: perhaps a portion of all the monies being targeted at carbon reduction programs might be made available to communities that can move forward in creating or invigorating their local farmer's market.

Now that would be a serious commitment to local farmers, and consumers.



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