



Fast

FACTS

CANADIAN CENTRE FOR POLICY ALTERNATIVES – MANITOBA

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Engaging Manitobans to Change Food Safety Regulations – the Bigger Picture

We all want healthy food for our neighbors, we all want to promote as many farms as possible growing that food and we want to inspire as many young people as possible and, how can we do this together?

-David Neufeld, farmer

This question was prompted by the controversial and well-publicized raid by Manitoba Agriculture, Food and Rural Development's (MAFRD) on Harborside Farms in August 2013. As a result, citizens are calling on government to better support Manitoba's local food system in support of family-scale farmers, fishers, hunters and processors.

In a surprising turn of events last summer, MAFRD confiscated \$8,000 of cured meats from Harborside Farms, some of which had recently won an award from the province's own Great Manitoba Food Fight. The inspectors were not required to show evidence of wrongdoing. Pam and Clint Cavers, owners, attempted to negotiate with MAFRD to be allowed to test the confiscated meat at their own costs to prove it safe. MAFRD refused and destroyed the meat, yet later dropped all charges.

Agriculture policy in Manitoba has historically focused on large-scale export commodity production. However, the growing popular interest in local, sustainable food is prompting the province to take a second look at supporting local food systems to improve economy, health and food security.

The message coming from the grassroots is clear: farmers, fishers, processors and citizens are demanding a say in policy-making and

have formed a coalition under the banner of FEAST (Farmers and Eaters Sharing the Table) to encourage the Province to support local sustainable food.

Currently the province is in the process of reformulating food safety regulations and undergoing an industry consultation process. This marks a step in the right direction, however it is important that the grassroots voices have a prominent place at the table and that the limitations of narrow 'consultation' processes are identified.

The province has stated they are moving towards "outcome-based regulations" that would allow different food safety processes, so long as an operator can prove a safe outcome. In principle, this should work in favor of small-scale producers and processors whose artisanal processes can result in safe outcomes without investing in the more expensive equipment and processes that larger plants require.

One of the main concerns is that the onus to prove safety is put onto the farmers/processors, yet decisions around whether the processes are safe (or not) are subjective and open to interpretation. To develop vibrant local food systems in the province, then we need to create a regulatory environment that provides safe food and is flexible enough to support these emerging business models. This type of regulatory framework has existed in European countries for years.

Regulatory changes here in Manitoba

there is an alternative.

CCPA-MB
205-765 Main St.
Winnipeg, MB
R2W 3N5

phone

(204) 927-3200

email

ccpamb@policyalternatives.ca

website

[www.policyalternatives.ca/
manitoba](http://www.policyalternatives.ca/manitoba)

blog

www.policyfix.ca

twitter

@ccpamb

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threaten to create winners and losers, underscoring the importance of a fair, inclusive and democratic policy development process. Kenton Lobe of FEAST suggested that this requires, “diverse stakeholder advisory committees, meaningful consultation that takes seriously the imperative of ‘involve early and often’ and processes that ensure that citizens voices have a place in policy formulation.”

The Minister of Agriculture has recently announced that MAFRD is forming a working group to, “work with small-scale food processors, direct-farm marketers, farmers and others to support getting more local food to market.” In the past, a similar working group assembled by MAFRD to develop the current Buy Manitoba program unfortunately lacked grassroots representation. As a result, Buy Manitoba primarily serves the interests of larger retailers and processors rather than supporting those who prefer to sell local food directly to consumers through buying clubs or farmer’s markets.

It is essential that the emerging working group be inclusive of the grassroots community including First Nations, Métis and immigrant groups whose food cultures require specific consideration in any regulatory change.

Another concern has been the jurisdictional boundaries between Manitoba Health and MAFRD and it is unclear how small local food businesses will navigate the two departments and the separate regulations. It also suggests that the current consultation processes are too narrowly focused on MAFRD regulations, where they should be considered simultaneously with changes to MB Health – not to mention the relationship with federal (CFIA) regulations.

Finally, members of FEAST have observed that in response to their requests for a more holistic approach to food safety that incorporates issues of economy, scale, environment and health, that MAFRD has strategically used “food safety as a hammer” to silence opposition. The rhetorical strategy has been to publically imply that challenges to the dominant food safety approach are reckless and dangerous.

Food safety is, of course, fundamentally important, but it is clear that there are different interpretations of what constitutes risk and what role government should play in regulating food safety in the context different types of relationships between food provider and eater. Informed citizens wish to make decisions about which local food they eat. Public health officials have great responsibility and hold much power in this debate that should not be used to silence other worldviews and regulatory alternatives.

There is great yet unmet potential for local food to provide economic, cultural and social benefits in Manitoba. The innovative foods that are being offered in Manitoba are not available through any other source. Care must be taken not to regulate Manitoba’s emerging food culture out of the province but rather government should be taking a more cooperative approach to supporting these emerging businesses and local economies.

Although the details of the new regulations are important, it is too easy to get lost in the minutia of these changes. Those involved in FEAST are suggesting that the narrow scope of these consultations obscure the more important issues that are not currently being considered.

Fortunately, FEAST has this bigger picture in mind and is pushing for a democratic and inclusive approach to shaping Manitoba’s food system. The province will best serve the interests of Manitobans by fully engaging with FEAST and working together to create a vibrant local food system. Stay tuned at: www.realmanitobafoodfight.ca

Colin Anderson is a Postdoctoral Research Fellow specializing in agriculture, food and community development and a CCPA Research Affiliate.

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CCPA-MB
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Winnipeg, MB
R2W 3N5

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