

## **Is Staying Small a Luxury?**

*By Ann Slater, NFU Board Member*

There is a groundswell of interest in local food across Ontario and as a result more and more farmers are choosing to market their meat direct to eaters through restaurants, farmers' market stalls, farm-gate sales and small retailers, like health food stores. In many cases, farmers are raising livestock to the specifications of their customers whether that be certified organic, grass-fed, humanely-raised or free-range. The relationship between farmer and customer is key in these local and niche markets. To maintain these relationships and the local, niche market it is absolutely essential for farmers to provide safe meat and to ensure only their meat is sold to their customers.

Without abattoirs that are small enough to completely process each animal individually, this relationship between farmers and eaters cannot exist. As abattoirs grow in size, so to does their equipment. The decision for a plant to get bigger may be a good business decision and can make the plant more efficient, however, as the equipment gets larger, the ability of abattoirs to process products, such as ground meat from individual animals decreases. If my meat is batch processed with meat from other farmers, I can no longer guarantee 100% of the meat I am selling to my customer is raised on my farm or that it is raised in the same way I raise my animals.

Small abattoirs are disappearing from much of rural Ontario, and if this trend continues, the options for farmers to tap into the local meat market to help make their farms more viable will also disappear. Farmers selling meat to customers they know individually are committed to safe food. They know their customers by name, as friends, as neighbours, and as part of their community. Small, provincially-inspected abattoirs are providing safe meat – with an inspector on-hand when each animal is killed, unlike the situation at large plants where inspectors only have a few moments to view an animal as it moves down the line.

Some individuals and organizations have put forward their opinion that if small abattoirs would just make the investment to grow their business and get bigger, then they would not be facing the struggle to survive. The suggestion has also been put forward that staying small is a luxury when it comes to small abattoirs.

Some abattoirs need to be able to stay small, so that they can continue to meet the needs of farmers who provide meat to the growing numbers of eaters committed to local food across the province. Farmers interact with small abattoir owners on a daily basis and know they are committed to safe food, and are hardworking, honest and trustworthy. They also know many small plants are working at, or at close to, full capacity and each time one small plant closes, our options as farmers to increase the amount of meat we sell to local markets decreases. For farmers selling local food the ability of small abattoirs to stay small and survive is not a luxury – it is a necessity for the survival of our relationships with our customers and the survival of our farms.

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