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It's business as usual at market

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Overcast skies and a slight drizzle yesterday didn't stop vendors at the weekly outdoor organic farmers' market at Riverdale Farm from setting up their booths or keep loyal customers from going shopping.

Talk of the regulation of farmers' markets, as proposed by Queen's Park, generally brought two distinct sets of responses.

For customers, regulation is irrelevant because they already have confidence in what the small-scale farmers they buy food from have to offer.

Meanwhile, farmers, bakers, food producers and their supporters don't mind regulations, so long as they focus on hygiene and food-safety issues.

As far as they are concerned, the government should be breaking new ground and allowing the sale of unpasteurized products and ungraded eggs at farmers' markets.

Currently, the Ontario government doesn't allow the sale of unpasteurized or raw milk and the sale of eggs beyond the farm gate if the eggs have not been graded for quality and weight in a provincially licensed and federally registered grading station.

Bruno Preto, a mushroom farmer and cheese seller from the Stouffville area, said that should change.

More and more people want unpasteurized milk for its nutritional value, as well as ungraded, organically produced eggs from small farmers, he said. But he believes milk and egg marketing boards oppose this for economic, not health, reasons.

"I think people understand the need for some control and order, but complete restriction of bringing things from the wild and grading them - that may be very hard to do," said Dan O'Leary of the Friends of Riverdale Farm.

To make his point, O'Leary, who helps organize the weekly market, said it would be difficult to grade wild fiddleheads.

Still, he said, government interest in farmers' markets could only be a healthy sign that more people are gravitating toward this niche world that focuses on pesticide- and antibiotic-free products.

Alvaro Venturelli of Plan B Organics Farm, near Flamborough, said he and other farmers were not afraid of scrutiny by the government because there are more pressing issues.

"Right now, the biggest issue with our food is not simplistic government legislation but the fact that the U.S. is dumping \$130 billion of food (in Canada), and the number one receiving ground for that food is the Ontario Food Terminal," he said.

That, he said, makes it prohibitively expensive for small-scale organic farmers like him to compete with U.S. imports.

Others, such as Bernie Schatti, who runs an elk farm free of antibiotics, hormones or steroids near Guelph, said he welcomed any initiative that would boost consumer confidence.

Customers such as Pauline Ellis, an area resident, said government regulation is irrelevant. "I already have confidence in the markets that I go to," said Ellis.

Others, such as Tamara Rebanks, however, said government interference could prove problematic.

"I think people have to be careful to not to put too many regulations in place. Otherwise, we may end up not having farmers' markets," Rebanks said.

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