

Provincial regulations hurting meat processing plants, owner says

By Mark Pavilons

Support abounds for Ontario's agri-food industry, but a local food processor believes it may just be lip service.

Doug Groombridge, who's been in the meat processing business for more than 46 years, contends government regulations are forcing small-scale agricultural operations to close. And the large-scale plants that remain are largely operated by U.S. based conglomerates.

That seems to contradict the concepts of shopping locally and sustainability.

When Premier Kathleen Wynne was in King for a Liberal fundraiser recently, she stressed the province is a strong supporter of the agri-food manufacturing industry, which "has huge potential to grow." Wynne is also the agriculture minister and she's working with that sector to promote local food options.

"I'm a huge optimist when it comes to Ontario's potential," Wynne said.

Groombridge doesn't share her optimism.

In fact, after decades in the business, he's facing a bleak future. He may close his small-scale abattoir on the 10th Concession, simply because he can't afford to make the costly physical improvements to the building that ministry inspectors have called for. He has a compliance order that expires Dec. 31.

The majority of the compliance issues, he contends, have nothing to do with the operation itself. In fact, he's been an exemplary local service provider, a good corporate citizen and a community volunteer. There has never been a quality or health issue with his operation and there have never been any complaints.

Yet, increasingly strict guidelines are pretty much putting a stranglehold on business like his.

More and more smaller meat processing plants are disappearing from Ontario's landscape. In the late 1960s, when the government began regulating the industry, there were some 500 plants across the province. That number has dwindled to roughly 140 today.

These plants use specialized equipment for their work - [National Band Saw sells replacement parts for meat grinder, meat saws and more](#) to help these plants remaining. Smaller operations are closing and the market is dominated by the large provincial and federal facilities, many of which are owned by foreign investors. Groombridge said to the best of his knowledge, there is no Canadian-owned cattle plant left.

"The government is regulating us to death," he said.

He provides a needed service to local farmers and should his operation end, his local customers will have very few options. The closest abattoirs are located in Aurora, Port Perry and Lindsay. For farmers who only have a dozen or so animals to deal with, or who simply want to feed their own families, driving to those places will be time-consuming and costly.

Many aspects of agriculture are taking it on the chin. "I've been a farmer all of my life. I'm a farmer first," he said. "Agriculture gets beaten up all the time. Farmers are the salt of the earth, but they're not great at lobbying."

The writing has been on the wall for some time. Groombridge was in business before meat inspectors were created and he said things have been getting tougher since the 1980s. Originally, inspectors were butchers, but today, most are young, educated professionals with no knowledge of the process at all. The costs of operating a plant have been rising for decades.

Continuing to invest in a declining industry just doesn't make sense. He's trying to work with the Township of King and the Oak Ridges Moraine to see if he can reorganize his property.

Groombridge said that surely if we care about local agriculture and sustainability, there should be support mechanisms in place, and not a methodical process to eliminate small-scale operations. The province needs to re-examine how it manages agriculture, and help those small plants, not simply just sit back and watch them go, he said.

The average age of today's farmers is rising and fewer young people are taking up the challenge. With profit margins shrinking, farming has become less lucrative.

Groombridge believes most who do it today simply "love farming and the lifestyle."

The trend is not limited to Groombridge's industry.

The closure of the Heinz ketchup plant in Leamington is the latest of several Canadian food processing plants bought and then closed by investors that move production to other countries in pursuit of higher profits.

"It is ironic that as Canadians are becoming more interested in buying locally-produced food, our supermarkets have less access to products that are actually grown in Canada," said John Sutherland, NFU Ontario President. "According to Statistics Canada, the total area used to grow vegetables declined by 13.5% between 2006 and 2011, due primarily to the loss of processing capacity. The only way to reverse this problem is to refocus Canada's food policy to promote food sovereignty instead of commodity exports."

Increasingly, grocery stores are buying food that used to be grown in Canada from companies that have shifted production to lower-cost processing facilities in India, Brazil, United States, Mexico and elsewhere.

"This is the price that ordinary Canadians ? in this case, farmers and workers ? pay for a food system dominated by global corporate interests," NFU vice-president and BC vegetable producer, Colleen Ross declared. "For these corporations ?local' is simply wherever they can get the cheapest price."

Agriculture, Groombridge observed, is going the way of the large retail big box stores, all at the expense of the producers. For consumers, it means they have fewer alternatives and choices.

Also, as fewer processing plants remain, it may see a rise in unregulated processing, as farmers chose to do it themselves. That flies in the face of why food inspectors were created in the first place. This may be the ultimate catch-22.

If you've eaten today, thank a farmer. Thanks alone isn't enough to ensure our farmers continue their service.