

FEAST: Farmers and Eaters Actively Sharing the Table



Progress Report

Towards a working relationship with government

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Origins and Background

FEAST was created in response to multiple needs expressed by food producers in Manitoba in order to address a lack of clarity related to provincial food safety regulations. This is related to the appropriateness of these regulations for small-scale vs. large-scale producers and processors, as well as other challenges faced through dealing with marketing boards and the allocation of quotas, lack of local and affordable processing facilities including abattoirs and commercial kitchens, and land-use policies that make it difficult for small-scale farmers to get established. This information was collected through a variety of meetings held from 2012-2014 across Manitoba attended by farmers, processors, farmers' market managers, community organizers, concerned eaters, gardeners, local business owners, health care providers, students, teachers and educators, and government officials. The three main methods of consultation have been through the Fostering Sustainable Regional Food Systems project (also called "The Node Project") which travelled to eight communities in Manitoba (2013 report available at: <http://www.localandjust.ca/wp-content/uploads/2013/07/Fostering-Sustainable-Inter-Regional-Food-Systems-JAvent-and-JLaforge-FINAL.pdf>), the Real Manitoba Food Fight campaign (<http://realmanitobafoodfight.ca/>), and now through public meetings held as "FEAST" in Clearwater in September 2013 and in Winnipeg in January 2014. FEAST has also been supported by funding that the 'node project' received from Manitoba Alternative Food Research Alliance (MAFRA) to continue to work on province wide initiatives that were identified in the pilot project year. This included a need to address regulatory barriers. In October 2013, Food Matters Manitoba and FEAST, along with Manitoba Agriculture Food and Rural Development (MAFRD) coordinated a meeting of community and government representatives and other non-governmental organizations to discuss ways to move forward on building a better food safety regulatory system in Manitoba. It is our hope that we can continue to build on this positive relationship and use the momentum we've built through the connections with Manitobans to collaboratively address food safety and other regulatory concerns.

Building Connections



Regulations as Barriers

At the September 13th, 2013 meeting in Clearwater, 18 participants outlined a variety of challenges that represent a range of issues that regulations at the federal, provincial, and municipal level present to small-scale food providers in Manitoba. These include:

- Lack of clarity in the food safety regulations. This leaves farmers feeling like they cannot understand the regulations and will inevitably have to make changes every time the inspector arrives. This indicates an inconsistency in interpretation of the regulations. In addition, changes are often expensive and prohibitive for small-scale producers. Some are concerned that even if they can afford to make these investments, they may be shut down anyway, making it uncomfortably risky.
- Marketing boards have a lot of power over quota allocation and these can be challenging to small-scale food producers who want to expand their business (eggs, meat chickens, sheep, etc.)

- There is no clear mandate to support small-scale local food producers and other local food businesses in Manitoba. In fact, participants felt that there is a preference to discourage these types of businesses or only make superficial investments in campaigns like “Buy Manitoba” where products like Coca-Cola can be labeled ‘local’. This dilutes the meaning of local for small-scale, craft producers.
- Lack of access to local small processing facilities. Abattoirs and inspectors are too far away. There aren’t enough commercial kitchens that are affordable and accessible to processors wanting to do small quantities. The Food Development Centre in Portage is acknowledged as an excellent facility, however accessibility (distance and scheduling) as well as cost are barriers for many start-up businesses.

Next Steps

At the meeting on January 18th 2014, we discussed ways in which FEAST can continue to move forward and represent the concerns of farmers, processors, and others. Starting with the ideas raised during the discussion in September which focused on the four key areas of representation and organization, public awareness and education, peer support, and research, we added discussion groups around creating a Legal Defense Fund and the historical/political context of this discussion in Manitoba. While there were many who were dedicated to moving forward on these initiatives, including attending meetings and providing feedback to MAFRD on regulatory changes, there were also concerns that by making membership public, farmers may be exposing themselves to further investigation. For the time being, membership will be kept private to protect people who have these concerns.



Vision and Recommendations

- Build bridges with other farmer and food organizations in Manitoba and Canada
- Create a safe place for farmers to share their challenges with anonymity

Legal Defense Fund

- Look at models from environmental justice organizations and the Farm to Consumer Legal Defense Fund in the US.
- Consider the implications of having legal insurance wherein a group of farmers would each contribute to having a lawyer on retainer to address one or two cases annually on behalf of the entire group.
- If building a national organization, remember that there are jurisdictional challenges and multiple lawyers would need to be recruited. This should be done in collaboration with other organizations.
- Seed money will be needed to help get this started – start asking for assistance.
- Get legal advice on how to structure FEAST so that there aren’t problems later.
- Provide farmers with an outline of their legal rights.

Organization and Governance

- Set up a steering committee and working groups to address particular issues.
- Regular meetings are critical – in person or over the phone to make sure that the conversation and momentum aren’t lost.

- Promote regional organizing so that people can build trust and local peer support and knowledge.
- Move towards formal recognition so we can have a place at the table.
- Create a voluntary membership list that has the option for anonymity, but still allows us to say who we are representing.
- Take steps to establish a formal structure to allow proper representation of all members.

Historical/Political Context

- Governments have been heavily influenced by corporate, agri-business interests which leaves little room for local, sustainable food producers.
- We want to change the understanding of what food production looks like to be more multidimensional and inclusive and to change the conversation around food safety to include environmental and human health and community wellness.

Education and Public Awareness

- Farmers can now access the Small Farms Manitoba directory (<https://www.smallfarmsmanitoba.com/>) to promote themselves and their products. This can also be a way to educate the public on the regulatory challenges that farmers are facing and which limit what they can produce and how they produce it.
- There is also a forum on the Small Farms Manitoba directory so producers can share stories and answer questions about regulations and other farming questions.
- Previously, we had also discussed the possibility of working with schools and educators to promote local food as a worthwhile alternative food source.
- Support and work with Manitoba Agriculture, Food and Rural Development (MAFRD) to develop a guidebook for direct farm marketing that will help to clarify regulations and other processing and production requirements.

Peer Support

- Primarily based on informal, local networks that already exist, but with additional support from other regions of the province and shared knowledge.
- Can also be based on the Fostering Sustainable Regional Food Systems project and the networks that were created there.
- Develop a course on regulatory issues for producers in partnership with government
- Finding support and inspiration in other provinces and funding ideas

Research

- Identify the regulatory problems in Manitoba, possibly through an anonymous survey, future meetings and consultation with members.
- Conduct comparative studies to look at how other provinces have addressed regulatory issues.
- Explore the existing research to see how and why food safety concerns are arising to better understand the risk posed by small-scale producers.
- Find examples of other successes in engaging with government and learn from these examples.
- Explore other examples of safe handling protocols and/or evidence of food safety for members.

Meetings will continue to be held with key community members in an effort to prepare for additional public meetings and to consult with MAFRD about upcoming changes to the food safety regulations in Manitoba. If you would like to be more involved and stay up to date, email feast.manitoba@gmail.com.