

Ontario Office  
R.R.#2  
Godfrey, ON K0H 1T0  
Tel (613) 273-5545  
Fax (613) 273-6290



**national farmers union**  
*In Union is Strength*

National Office  
2717 Wentz Ave.  
Saskatoon, Sask., S7K 4B6  
Tel (306) 652-9465  
Fax (306) 664-6226

**FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE**

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**MEAT INSPECTION FIASCO THREATENS FAMILY FARMS AND CONSUMER CHOICE:  
NFU CALLS FOR IMMEDIATE ACTION ON PROVINCIAL MEAT INSPECTION**

**St. Mary's, Ont.**—The provincial government needs to get its act together on meat inspection. Failure to do so may spell the end of family farms and consumer choice in Ontario according to the National Farmers Union.

NFU Women's Advisor Ann Slater says, "At a time when beleaguered livestock farmers need continued support from consumers and from government, the Ontario Minister of Agriculture has disappeared. The people of Ontario do not need one more reason to question the safety of our meat supply. The vast majority of abattoirs in the province are doing an excellent job but we need to know that the government has the safeguards in place to detect any potential problems."

Slater says, "Since the Conservative government reduced the number of full-time meat inspectors from 142 to 8, the meat inspection force has been made up primarily of low paid, low morale contract inspectors with limited experience and training. While this situation has clearly led to inaction on alleged difficulties at one facility, it has also caused inconsistency and harassment of the many reputable abattoirs in the province and a high turnover rate among inspectors."

Dave Pullen, President of the Perth-Oxford Local of the NFU, says, "These small abattoirs represent a very important link between family farms and consumers since they process meats for small farms who sell their products directly to consumers. These products include certified organic, naturally-raised, and specialty cuts of beef, lamb, and pork. With so much uncertainty in the meat industry this year, more and more consumers are seeking out direct relationships with farmers to know where their food is coming from, how it is produced, and now, where it is being processed."

The NFU is concerned that the failure of the provincial government to address problems with provincial meat inspection may erode consumer confidence in these important small, local, provincially-inspected facilities, leading to further inability of family farms to market their own products. Larger, federally-inspected meat processors are in most cases unable to give farmers back meats from their own animals to sell to their customers. Their interest is in processing large volumes of undifferentiated product for wholesale to supermarket chains and fast food chains.

Pullen notes that the Minister of Agriculture and her office failed to even respond to an invitation from the NFU to attend an important meeting of farmers, consumers, meat inspectors, and small abattoir operators in Stratford in June 2003. Following the meeting, a number of recommendations were put forward to the government including a call:

- to reinstate experienced, full-time meat inspectors specific to small plants,
- to create incentive programs for small plants to meet standards,
- for training programs for aspiring meat cutters and butchers, and
- for standards and inspectors tailored to small plants.

It is now apparent the Minister of Agriculture was informed more than a year ago of problems with the Ontario meat inspection system and has failed to make any improvements.

NFU member Bruce Hunter says, "This continued neglect of a potential food-safety issue does little to support the small and medium-sized farmers of the province and the provincially-inspected abattoirs that they rely on. NFU members have a total and absolute commitment to provide safe, nutritious and plentiful food to society. A strong government-run inspection system that is fair to small abattoirs and meat processors is essential to farm families and their communities."

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For more information contact:

Ann Slater: (519) 349-2448

Bruce Hunter: (519) 393-6649