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## **Small meat shops caught by stricter government rules**

Posted By MICHAEL-ALLAN MARION

Carl Norg says he has a great secret recipe for ready-to-eat, smoked sausages.

Hundreds of people can attest to it, who came from miles around to buy them at the very shop, Carl's Choice Meats, on Highway 53, just west of Rest Acres Road, where they were made on the premises.

But, for several months now, Norg hasn't been able to make them there anymore. That's because recent government regulations have lumped his and other small, free-standing meat markets in with the big-league producers, such as Maple Leaf, which are required to follow strict processing and reporting protocols meant for plants that hire hundreds of workers.

Consequently, Norg has to get other small-market processors of sufficient size, like Gourmet Meats in Mount Hope and Country Meat Packers in Sheffield, to make sausages that are, well, good, but still not like his.

After trying to work through local MPs and MPPs, Norg and other affected small producers are making a public appeal for help in getting the federal and provincial governments to show more sensitivity to the size of their operations and return them to a suitable regulatory standard, so they can make their individualized sausages and other cured meats again.

"My customers should be allowed to buy my stuff," Norg said in his small office while taking a break from cutting, along with a couple of workers, other fresh meats that he is legally able to process and sell on the premises.

"My place and others like it are part of the fabric of Ontario. Some of its flavour is right here."

The ire is directed at an accursed regulation that they can recite in their sleep as "O. Reg. 31/05." It's the one that small meat markets producing less than 22,000 pounds per week were added into in the Food Safety and Quality Act in November 2008.

Before then, small operations could cure and smoke in the same kitchen where they handled fresh meats, as long as they took the proper precautions, obeyed regulations and passed regular inspections.

The regime perfectly suited places such as Carl's Choice Meats and protected the public.

"We always thought it was better to sell product at the store than truck it to other places," said Norg.

He also realized that to respond to the growing market, some features had to be upgraded in and around the store.

"I didn't mind spending the money, because the growth in sales covered the expenses."

By 2006, it became clear that a new regulation was coming that could affect operations the size of Carl's Choice Meats.

The changes would transform the fresh and cured production into separate rooms, with different entrances and exits.

The Ontario Ministry of Agriculture, Food and Rural Affairs also would be bringing in a new microbiological regulatory monitoring program with a system of reporting protocols clearly intended for larger operations.

It would require Norg to undertake his own work, often alone, then go through a checklist of what he had done, and then report to and check that himself.

"I understand that if you have a plant with 40 to 50 employees, all that should be done, but it makes no sense here," he said. "There's just me and three other people. Even if I was the only one here, it would still all have to be done. It's important to have a record to track a big operation, but do I need it here? No."

Norg paid for a consultant to do an audit to find out what changes would have to be made, and at what cost, to comply with the rules.

The consultant recommended an expansion that would cost about \$300,000 to separate various aspects of production. A provincial program that supplied funding to help operators cope with the change provided matching funds only up to a limit of \$25,000.

So, he got a second opinion. That one came back with other needed changes, but the total still came to \$300,000.

Norg was hamstrung -the scale of his operation wouldn't justify that large an expenditure.

Sure enough, he got a letter on Nov. 28, 2008, from OMAFRA's Food Inspection Branch informing him that the new program was coming into effect on Jan. 1, 2009.

Under the circumstances, Norg felt he had no other choice but to surrender his licence to operate a plant where he would be producing ready-to-eat meats on the premises.

He was reduced to bringing in meats from elsewhere, cutting, packaging and selling them as little more than a butcher and a retailer.

On Christmas Eve, 2008, Norg got another letter laced with stern language from an official in the Food Inspection Branch.

"It is my understanding that you have voluntarily surrendered your licence to operate as a meat plant," the letter said, noting the licence's return to a particular official.

"Should you continue to carry out regulated activities such as curing or smoking, your business will be in noncompliance with the Act and OMFRA will take enforcement actions, up to and including the laying of charges under the Act and detention of product and equipment."

The letter also did tell him that he was free to reacquire a licence, and provided him with information about avenues of assistance -all of which he already had exhausted.

Still, it was a bitter blow to a man known for high-quality production and a good reputation built on satisfied customers in the community.

Norg joined others in a lobbying campaign to get:

A grandfather clause excluding already existing small operations from the main regulation;

A specific designation and different standards for small facilities;

And a reduction in the amount of paper work required for them.

Norg also met with Brant MPP Dave Levac and Brant MP Phil McColeman.

Levac began lobbying Agriculture Minister Leona Dombrowsky.

"The problem is that Mr. Norg does not do the kind of, or amount of, processing in which the standards would apply to his particular business," Levac wrote in a letter in March, calling into attention the high cost of changes that would be necessary at Carl's Choice Meats.

"This is especially troubling as Mr. Norg has had to layoff all of his staff while he makes some very serious decisions regarding his business. Mr. Norg is desperately looking for a compromise in order to keep his business going, and hire his staff back (he later did under a revised business plan).

"I implore this government to work with him to try to find a way in which he can make the changes necessary, but one to which his particular business fits, and not those of a major meat processing company."

Levac asked the minister to speak directly with Norg.

Norg later got a letter from Dombrowsky in which she told him she didn't have the time for a meeting, and directed him to one of her staff.

He met that official on May 25 and made his case. In a later letter, the official alluded to work being done by to develop more practical options for small operators, which has not borne just yet.

Norg also sent letters to Harinder Takhar, minister of Small Business and Consumer Services, Michael Bryant, minister of Economic Development. He even fired one off through Levac to Monique Smith, minister of Tourism, explaining the importance of small plants in attracting the travelling public to particular locales for products with unique recipes.

"As small independent meat shops, we create our own recipes, one being totally different from another and add to the unique flavour of what is known as Ontario," it reads.

"For ourselves, we have out-of-province folks stopping by regularly to purchase our products. This gives them a reason to visit Brantford, or at least to detour through Brantford on their way from Michigan or New York State. There would be no need for them to stop by, if we all sold the same products, made by the same manufacturer."

Norg says he is prepared to try every avenue in his struggle get equitable treatment.

He realizes that the public may link the Listeriosis tragedy as a catalyst to the regulatory change, but he points out the change was already coming before the deadly outbreak sprang up last year.

On June 15, Norg got a letter from another official at the Food Inspection Branch, bearing suggested changes in location of the smokehouse, cutting room and cooler access, based on his observations from having visited the plant. The changes were supposed to make things a bit easier.

Norg doesn't think they're going to help much, and is determined to keep lobbying in the hopes that the government will see the error of its ways.

"What else can I do?" he asks. "What has happened is not fair."