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Food safety at the small scale: The case of meat inspection regulations in British Columbia's rural and remote communities

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A B S T R A C T

Food safety standards have become a contested policy and discursive terrain, often pitting regulations developed for an international, industrial food system against the practices of small-scale farmers. In the wake of the Bovine Spongiform Encephalopathy (BSE) crisis and other food scares, the provincial government in British Columbia (B.C.), Canada enacted a set of stringent meat inspection regulations that essentially eliminated small-scale abattoirs in 2004. The results of these regulations were devastating to small-scale farmers in rural and remote communities and in 2010 the BC government acted to mitigate these impacts by developing a training and licensing program for rural and remote regions. This paper traces this policy shift and government and industry attempts to ameliorate the adverse effects of the 2004 regulations. In developing this set of regulations, the Province recognized that there are differing levels of risk of food-borne illness for large and small-scale producers. Through interviews with farmers and Provincial stakeholders involved in the creation of this program, we suggest that this approach acknowledges alternative notions of risk and food safety that are more aligned with the practices of small-scale farmers in isolated places far from centralized processing facilities. However, while the introduction of Class D and E licenses has the potential to improve community food security and sovereignty, they have not entirely eliminated the structural barriers that local farmers experience in processing their own meat for sale. Thus, the creation of these licenses is only one aspect of a much larger approach to agricultural sustainability that must be enacted in order to preserve food production in rural and remote communities.

1. Introduction

The "global BSE crisis" has had significant economic effects at multiple scales within the Canadian meat producing industry, including on the economic viability of family farms (Anderson and McLachlan, 2012; McIntyre and Rondeau, 2009). In 2004, spurred by the 2003 discovery of several Canadian cattle with BSE and subsequent bans on meat from Canada by many international trading partners, the Province of British Columbia (B.C) developed a stringent set of meat inspection regulations (MIR) that were intended to assuage the concerns about the safety of its meat supply. These new regulations mandated that all meat slaughter in BC must be performed at a federally or provincially licensed plant. Prior to this time, unlicensed abattoirs and on-farm slaughter were allowed, overseen by regional health authority guidelines, in most rural areas in B.C. (BC Ministry of Health, 2011). These new regulations were particularly onerous for small-scale farmers living in rural and remote communities in that they were forced to transport their animals long distances to a licensed plant and for some, it also meant an expensive and time consuming ferry ride.

The effects of the 2004 MIR on community food security and rural sustainability have been reported elsewhere (Johnson, 2008; Reichert and Thomson, 2010; McMahon, 2011; Miewald et al., 2013). In short, farm-gate meat sales, which were previously a part of many rural families' livelihoods in many remote and rural communities, were largely eliminated. The only exceptions were farmers who continued to slaughter and sell their meat illegally which put them in danger of fines and other sanctions. The result was greater reliance on meat brought in from other parts of the Province or Alberta. Difficulties in complying with the rigorous new regulations led to complaints from small-scale abattoirs and farmers regarding the potentially devastating financial impacts of the mandated changes. Increased transportation to licensed

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Table 1
Abattoir licenses available under British Columbia's Graduated Licensing System (2012).

License type	Activities permitted	Sales permitted	Geographic scope	Number of animal units	Oversight
Federal License	Slaughter, and cut and wrap	Retail and direct to consumer	B.C. and out of province	Unlimited	Pre- and post-slaughter inspection of each animal
Class A	Slaughter, and cut and wrap	Retail and direct to consumer	B.C.	Unlimited	Pre- and post-slaughter inspection of each animal
Class B	Slaughter only	Retail and direct to consumer	B.C.	Unlimited	Pre- and post-slaughter inspection of each animal
Class D	Slaughter only (own animals and other peoples' animals)	Retail and direct to consumer	Sales restricted within the regional district where meat is produced	1–5	Periodic site assessments and audit of operational slaughter records
Class E	Slaughter only (own animals only)	Direct to consumer only	Sales restricted within the regional district where meat is produced	1–10	Periodic site assessments and audit of operational slaughter records
Personal Use	Slaughter only	None	For producer consumption only	Unlimited	None

Table adapted from BC Ministry of Health (nd) http://www.health.gov.bc.ca/protect/meat-regulation/graduated_licensing.html.

abattoirs made necessary by the eradication of on-farm slaughter and unlicensed abattoirs, threatened many farming operations in remote communities (Johnson, 2008; Lee, 2011). Moreover, there were concerns about the impact on animal welfare of long travel times from farms to processing facilities (Greger, 2007). According to industry officials and local farmers, several hundred unlicensed slaughterhouses closed after 2004 and while there was an increase in licensed facilities from 12 in 2004 to 50 in 2011 (BC Ministry of Health, 2011), none were located within reasonable transportation distance of many rural and remote communities.

In 2010, in the face of protests from many farmers, the BC government provided targeted support in a select number of remote rural communities to support local meat processing (BC Ministry of Healthy Living and Sport, 2010). These programs consisted of training support (a program called SlaughterSafe) accompanied by a new set of graduated licenses (referred to as Class D and E) that would bring on-farm slaughter up to the standards of the new regulations while accounting for the relative risk of small-scale production. This comprehensive program to improve meat production in selected rural and remote communities affected by the 2004 regulations can be considered an example of scale-sensitive policies in the area of agri-food governance that are increasingly identified as lacking in current food policy (DeLind and Howard, 2008).

These amendments to the 2004 Meat Inspection Regulations created D and E licenses in designated "rural and remote" regions. These are rural parts of the Province where connection to other communities is limited due to geographic distance or by reliance on winter roads, air, or water-based access (People's Food Policy Project, 2011). Class D (rural retail) licenses allow the slaughter of up to 25 animal units[1] annually and sales to local retail and restaurants within designated regional districts where no provincially licensed facilities exist. Class E (rural farm-gate) licenses allow for the slaughter of up to 10 animal units and direct farm gate sales only (see Table 1). The ability to obtain one of these licenses, however, is limited to specific geographic areas defined by the Province as an area that has: i) an absence of licensed slaughter facilities, ii) low population density, iii) small livestock numbers, iv) transportation barriers such as required marine transportation or seasonal road closures. At present there are 10 regions within the Province that have this designation (Fig. 1). If an operator is not located within the designated boundaries, he or she may still be eligible for a Class E license at the discretion of the Ministry of Health (BC Ministry of Health, 2011).

Food safety, security and risk have become a regulatory battleground within agri-food governance that often pits the industrial food system against the alternative food movement with food safety standards becoming an increasingly contested policy terrain (Allen et al., 2003; Fish et al., 2013; Hassanein, 2003, 2011; Hendrickson and Heffernan, 2002; Marsden, 2008; Woods, 2012). Food safety scares, such as BSE, *E. coli* O157:H7 in bagged salad, spinach and other produce and concerns over genetically modified organisms (GMOs) as well as popular calls for a return to "real" food has resulted in increasing consumer skepticism over the safety of industrially produced food (DeLind and Howard, 2008; Finucane, 2002; Juska et al., 2003; Pollan, 2006a; Schlosser, 2006; Stuart, 2008) with "producers and consumers seeking to create new boundaries and 'safe-havens' around their particular production systems" (Woods, 2012) In particular, the safety and sustainability of the meat industry have come under increased public scrutiny and critique (Drescher et al., 2012). Alternative food system advocates often point to the risks inherent within an industrial food system where, because of long and complex supply chains, the scope of food contamination can be widespread and both economically and socially disruptive on an international scale (Stuart and Worosz, 2011, 2012). In contrast, food provided through short supply chains is often perceived by the public to be healthier and safer (Murdoch et al., 2000; Renting et al., 2003; Parker et al., 2012). At the same time, the international trade in food has given rise to increasingly stringent standards using a "scientific, risk-based approach" and technological fixes in order to protect against biological and chemical contamination (Dunn, 2007; Hassanein, 2003, 2011; Pollan, 2006b; Stuart and Worosz, 2011, 2012; Woods, 2012; Wales et al., 2006). These "one-size-fits-all" regulations, however, "cannot solve such nuanced problems as those that arise from food safety concerns" (Parker et al., 2012). Food safety policies that fail to address the conditions faced by small-scale producers and processors can make it impossible for these critical actors within a local food system to survive economically due to the regulatory burdens placed upon them. As a result, these policies are often met with resistance by small-scale farmers, local food advocates and by some consumers because they are perceived as contributing to barriers to development of local food systems and threaten the economic sustainability of small farms.

This case study explores the creation of meat safety regulations that attempt to take scale into account and their implications for small farmers in rural British Columbia. We follow Hinrichs (2013:4) in arguing that scale is a strategic consideration that may facilitate understanding, managing and changing the food system." First, we are interested in understanding the role of local meat production as a component of both community food security and food sovereignty. These concepts go beyond individual or household nutrition and food consumption (which was outside of the scope of this study) to focus on food self-sufficiency, sustainability and autonomy within communities (Alkon and Mares, 2012;

[1] 454 kg = one animal unit.