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Small-scale food processing in Ontario needs regional supports says report

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Tax and food safety regulations don't address the needs of small and mid-scale food processors argues research director for the Canadian Institute for Environmental Law and Policy

by SUSAN MANN

Ontario's food processing sector is inadequate for many small and medium-scale farmers and should be restructured into regional food clusters, says the authors of a recently published research report.

Maureen Carter-Whitney, research director of the Canadian Institute for Environmental Law and Policy, says through the course of their research interviewing farmers and others they learned tax and food safety regulations are geared more for large processing facilities. The Institute is an independent, non-profit environmental think tank.

Other jurisdictions, such as Maryland in the United States, are looking to modify their regulations so they still protect food safety but they apply more to smaller and medium enterprises.

For distribution, "we advocate for a regional food cluster to make distribution easier," she says.

Carter-Whitney describes a regional food cluster as a grouping of facilities and businesses in specific regions "where certain kinds of food is grown." There would be technologies available in those areas so smaller processors can access them.

In doing the report, called Nurturing Food and Vegetable Processing in Ontario, Carter-Whitney says they got the sense there's a lot of new, smaller-scale processing happening in Ontario. The markets are there and are growing "but the regulations and the structures in place are really scaled to much larger businesses."

Sally Miller of the West End Food Co-op says one of the things they learned through the more than 40 interviews they did is there's a very strong and unanimous need among farmers for local food processing directed at small and medium scale operations. The Co-op is owned by farmers, consumers, social service agencies and workers. It runs a farmers market in Toronto and hopes to open a community-owned grocery store.

John Kelly, vice president of Erie Innovation and Commercialization, agrees that currently in Ontario growers have few routes to market and the system needs to be overhauled. The avenues to market available to growers now are: the Toronto Food Terminal for fresh produce; major retailers; contracting; plus direct sales, such as farmers' markets or farm gate sales.

About 2,000 producers annually sell produce through the Terminal either by having a stand there or going through a major distributor.

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