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NFU URGES APPROPRIATE REGULATIONS FOR LOCAL ABATTOIRS

LONDON - Locally-owned and operated small abattoirs are an important link between family farmers and consumers, and the Ontario government should implement appropriate measures to ensure these operations remain viable, according to the National Farmers Union (NFU).

In a presentation to the Meat Inspection Review headed by Justice Roland J. Haines in London March 31, NFU Ontario Women's Advisory Committee member Ann Slater said consumer demand is growing for locally-grown, specialty products such as certified organic, humanely raised, grass-fed or hormone-free meat.

"This demand will only be met by small abattoirs willing to deal with a variety of animals and able to return the meat from each animal to the farmer that brought the animal to the plant," said Slater. "To maintain the integrity of organic certification, abattoirs must follow organic regulations and keep organic animals separate from other animals in the plant. Smaller facilities, without long packing lines and time constraints, are better able to meet these requirements."

Over a twelve year period from 1990 to 2002, realized net income per farm in Ontario fluctuated between \$5000 and \$15,000. This chronic income shortfall is aggravated by the ongoing Bovine Spongiform Encephalopathy (BSE) crisis. "One solution for farmers is to capture an increased share of the food dollar by selling food direct to consumers," said Slater. She noted that farmers selling certified organic lamb, killed at local abattoirs, through wholesalers in Toronto are receiving a \$30 to \$40 premium.

She pointed out that many abattoirs are currently stretched beyond capacity. "A widespread network of small abattoirs provides an essential safety net for producers" when a widespread crisis devastates the normal market channels, she added.

Provincially-inspected abattoirs offer advantages that ensure an ongoing safe meat supply, explained Slater. "The shortest and most direct chain reduces risk with fewer handlers, less transportation and less mixing of meat from several animals." Farmers can obtain direct feedback from the inspection process, something which cannot occur at a large packing plant. There is less stress on the animals prior to slaughter and the animals are able to hang for a longer period of time at smaller abattoirs, factors which both improve the quality of the meat.

The NFU is committed to providing safe food, said Slater. "Our members have found the vast majority of small, provincially-inspected abattoir owners to be professional, hardworking, honest and trustworthy. However, for the few that do not meet the basic requirements a strong, fair inspection system is required."

Slater identified better working conditions for provincial meat inspectors as a key to retaining qualified workers. The current turnover rate for provincial meat inspectors is 33% per year. While the recent reinstatement of salaried positions is a positive step, Slater said inspectors should be encouraged to gain more training and experience. Because of different animal types and practices between small abattoirs and large packing plants, the NFU is calling for fair and consistent regulations tailored to small operations.

Slater concluded that local, multi-species abattoirs are essential to the survival of the family farm and strong rural communities. "These abattoirs must be inspected fairly, consistently and under regulations appropriate to the size and scale of the operation," she said. Since 1991, the number of provincially-inspected plants in Ontario has declined by 40%. "Each time an abattoir closes farmers are forced to travel further, jobs are lost, and consumers are forced to turn to supermarkets for meat that probably comes from a different province or country," she concluded.

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BACKGROUNDER FACTS:

The NFU has proposed several measures to nurture small abattoirs and support the communities and farmers that rely on them. These proposals include:

- * Training programs for aspiring meat cutters and butchers;
- * Better training for inspectors and salaried positions specific to small plants;
- * Standards and inspectors tailored to small plants;
- * Creation of incentive programs for small plants to meet standards or transfer ownership and incentives to start small plants;

*What is the current situation with respect to abattoir capacity in Ontario?
Between 1991 and 2001:*

- * The number of animals slaughtered went from 5.8 million to 9.9 million.
- * The number of inspection hours decreased from about 177,000 to 132,000;
- * The number of inspected packing plants went from 351 to about 200.