

Guest column: Food for thought on Thanksgiving

BY ELEANOR BOYLE, THE PROVINCE OCTOBER 10, 2010



Without even bringing up animal-right issues, there's an environmental and health price we pay from the factory farming and food production we rely on to produce cheap meat.

Photograph by: Submitted

Ah, the earthy scent of new harvest. Good fresh dirt and a little manure. Whether or not we've lived in rural regions, most of us have experienced and appreciated that bracing farm air. So why are residents and visitors to the Fraser Valley complaining about the smell?

The issue was raised in a fascinating article in last Sunday's *Province*, detailing the rising number of air-quality complaints around farmlands east of Vancouver. Those who defend current agricultural practices dismiss the criticism as over-sensitivity from naive urbanites.

But there's something they've neglected to say. Livestock production isn't what it used to be -- and neither is the air.

As I have discovered in researching environmental and health problems of intensive meat production, today there is often a powerful stench. That's true around Lethbridge cattle feedlots, Winnipeg-area hog farms or Abbotsford chicken barns. It's a result of too many animals crowded into too little space, the reality in meat production today.

A single Fraser Valley barn often holds 50,000 chickens. Most of the 100 million poultry birds produced in B.C. each year come from valley factory farms. And despite the unnatural conditions,

nature calls daily to each of the animals, which create piles of feces laden with antibiotics and other chemicals from feed additives and fertilizer.

Pollution from livestock is not specifically the fault of Fraser Valley chicken producers. The issue is bigger than that. It's a function of the growing international consumer habit of eating meat every day and sometimes every meal, and of expecting the meat to be cheap. And it's a function of food policies and systems that encourage big industrial farms rather than small ones, though the latter are usually more sustainable.

The Fraser Valley is a microcosm of world agriculture that is facing the environmental, health and community fallout of excessive meat production and consumption. In rural Manitoba, authorities have struggled for years with agribusiness hog barns and their waste. One Manitoba report quoted a hog-industry supporter as taunting rural residents who dared complain.

"If you want fresh air," he said, "move to the city."

Factory animal production results in plenty of meat, which sounds good in a populous world. But the amounts consumed are often more than is optimal for health, contributing to obesity, heart disease and cancers. The average Canadian eats the equivalent of two large burgers a day in various meats and much more in all animal products combined.

In developing and emerging countries, consumption is rising rapidly — not just from population growth but per capita — as new middle classes seek the status of regular high-fat foods.

To satisfy the demand we have factory farming. That system is radically different from the romantic images of contented cows and sheep, and barnyards of chickens and pigs, chewing on marginal grasses or scraps, leaving just enough manure for fertilizer, then becoming food for us. Factory farming, by contrast, is not a good use of resources.

Making meat uses more water and land for pasture and feedcrops than the production of other foods. Meat adds significantly to climate change, from deforestation and greenhouse gases and it is a major source of water pollution worldwide, according to the United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization.

The Walkerton, Ont., water contamination of a decade ago was blamed on poor monitoring and regulation. But the source of the bacteria O157.H7 E. coli was cattle manure from neighbourhood livestock farms located with some risk of run-off into the town's wells.

When you hear about contaminated water systems, you can bet there may be livestock nearby.

Internationally, it is well-documented that factory farming tends to create more waste than can serve as useful fertilizer. The manure often gets spread in excess on local farmland and one good rain washes part of it into nearby waterways.

Meanwhile, the manure adds bacteria and other particulate matter to the air, attracts flies and impairs the health and enjoyment of life for rural residents.

Factory farms threaten humans in other ways, including by adding to the rise of avian and other flus. And that's not even considering the ethical problems of living conditions for factory-farmed animals.

There are solutions, starting with all of us eating less meat. There is nothing radical about this. Cutting back on over-consumption of animal products is a modest and reasonable response to serious environmental and health concerns.

There is no need for anyone to become vegetarian who doesn't wish to, but we can eat smaller portions of meat and less often.

If we shift our spending priorities, most of us can afford to pay more, for organic and sustainably-made meat.

Additionally, as citizens, we can encourage our politicians to develop new food laws and regulations that promote ecological and healthy livestock systems. Industry needs to improve practices, as they are attempting through the B.C. Sustainable Poultry Farming Group. Tax breaks and subsidies can be aimed at small-scale community-owned operations, and environmental regulations can be better enforced. Numerous federal political parties are interested in developing a national food policy. Contact your representatives and urge that they support better livestock production.

To explore this issue, check web-sites from any of: Beyond Factory Farming, Meatless Monday Canada, the People's Food Policy Project, Earthsave Canada and TEDTalks on being a "weekday vegetarian."

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How to cut down on your consumption of meat

- There are many ways to cut your meat consumption, including:
- Move meat to the side of the plate. Serve smaller portions, as a peripheral dish rather than as the main attraction.
- At restaurants, where portion sizes are often too large, share a meat meal rather than ordering an entire one yourself.
- Eat the whole animal. Buy unusual cuts rather than only those considered choice.
- Try to minimize food waste, especially animal products that took so many resources, and so much life, to produce.
- Substitute non-meat edibles into your favourite dishes. In pastas, pizzas, stews and soups, leave out the meat and substitute extra vegetables or a little tofu or beans.