



Southwestern

Cattle at Chad and Dorothy Coghlin's 50-acre farm near Coldwater, north of Barrie. (Mary Baxter)

Does Ontario have enough slaughterhouses?

The number of provincially licensed abattoirs is in decline. Critics say that hurts farmers and the local-food movement — and they're calling on the government to act

By **Mary Baxter** - Published on Aug 28, 2019



COLDWATER — You won't find chickens in cramped quarters at Chad and Dorothy Coghlin's 50-acre farm near Coldwater, a Severn Township village north of Barrie. The birds live in airy, open-bottomed coops, designed by Chad, an engineer, which allow them to scratch for insects just as they would in the wild; the avian droppings fertilize the fields. Products are sold through the couple's on-farm store, farmers' markets, and a local distributor. Since the Coghlin's began to sell in earnest to local

customers in 2016, it's become a 25,000-chicken-per-year business, making the Coghlin's operation, Integrated Farms, the country's largest producer of pastured chicken.

But the Coghlin's have hit a snag, one that many Ontario farmers who sell locally face: the lack of a local, provincially licensed abattoir. Last year, the couple failed to break even because of the expenses they incurred taking the birds — and a small number of pigs and cattle — to a processor more than two hours away, in Elora. “We’re paying a \$1.40 a pound just to get our chickens processed,” says Chad. “If I wanted to go buy wholesale chicken, I can buy it for less than it costs me to process my own chicken.”

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Provincially licensed abattoirs have become scarcer and scarcer: there are now 124 facilities, down from 300 in 1995. Unlike their federally licensed counterparts — which deal with higher volumes, buy animals from auctions or on contract, and usually specialize in the slaughter of just one animal type — provincial abattoirs provide custom slaughter services to farmers. They’re where farmers go, for example, when they want to process a few animals and then sell meat cuts at a local farmers’ market.

Farmers need these types of facilities, says Phil Mount, executive director of Sustain Ontario, an umbrella organization for sustainable-food and -farming organizations: “They can’t be going to any of the larger [federal] facilities — they just will not get the time. [Federal plants] just won’t process them; they’re not equipped to do it.” He says the shortage is stalling the local-food movement, which promotes locally grown foods and regional food distribution.

The shortage is also increasing travel time to the abattoirs, Mount says, which takes a toll on farmers and animals. “No matter how well you treat your animals over the course of their life, if you’ve then got to put them in a truck and drive them for a couple of hundred kilometres, that’s not the height of animal welfare,” he says.

In the Coghlin’s case, the monthly trip to the processor during production seasons — spring, summer, and fall — is a 36-hour marathon. “We have to drop off our freezer trailer, pick up the catching trailer, bring it back here, catch [birds] all night, and deliver to the processor early in the morning,” Chad says. “We sleep at the processor’s in the truck while they’re killing. Then, while they’re packaging, we help them in the plant, and we help package and put [the birds] in the truck. And then we usually get back around one o’clock in the morning.”

Livestock farmers and groups such as the National Farmers’ Union are now calling on the province to recognize abattoirs as essential rural infrastructure to improve their eligibility for government support. “We’d like to see funding improved to small abattoirs so they can operate,” says Don Ciparis, president of the Ontario chapter of the NFU. Kristy Denette, a spokesperson for the Ministry of Agriculture, Food and Rural Affairs, told TVO.org via email that while provincial funding is available for provincially licensed abattoirs, it is intended only for existing plants and doesn’t apply to the development of new ones. The provincial government “is committed” to supporting the growth of licensed plants, she wrote.

Not everyone agrees that funding is the issue. “Most [abattoir owners] that failed to remain in operation [did so] because they just didn’t have any managerial knowledge,” says Sylvain Charlebois, a food-policy professor at Dalhousie University who co-authored a 2014 study on the Ontario issue. “They were making bad decisions.” Many plants, the study notes, failed to upgrade their facilities.

In her 2014 master’s thesis, University of Toronto geography student Hillary Barter pointed to another possible reason for the decline: “provincial regulation designed to ensure food safety” and the “significant financial burden” it represents for businesses.

Regulations governing provincial abattoirs have changed over the past two decades in response to growing concerns about food safety and as part of a move to bring them

into alignment with federal requirements.

Ernie Hardeman, Ontario's agriculture minister, told TVO.org via email that, this year, the government changed some regulations affecting smaller abattoirs. "We are taking action to target unnecessary, costly and burdensome regulations within the agri-food sector while maintaining rules that help keep Ontarians safe and healthy," he stated. One of those changes involved introducing a one-time \$300 administrative-licensing fee for meat plants. (Previously, meat processors had paid \$300 every three years to renew their licence.)

Mount says that such changes are unlikely to have much impact on existing operations. For example, removing the requirements that facilities have a water-sampling tap or a backflow-prevention device, he says, will produce only minor savings for those planning to develop or expand facilities.

Many farmers have tried to address the abattoir shortage by taking matters into their own hands: some have pooled cash to develop community-owned abattoirs from scratch; others have bought existing facilities. The latter is what two farmers in Algoma did when their local abattoir teetered on the brink of bankruptcy in 2015.

In that instance, the decision paid off: today, Mike Tulloch and Chris Gordon's facility is working at maximum capacity. They slaughter 15 cattle a week to supply Penokean Hills Farms, the specialty beef brand they've developed, and also service the local farm community. They plan to expand the facility next year, says Nick Gordon, the brand's sales and marketing manager.

Farmer ownership doesn't guarantee success, Gordon notes, pointing out that the facility was previously owned by a committee of farmers. "Without this branded program that we've been working on, we wouldn't have an abattoir," he says.

The Coghlin's are also considering building an abattoir — they just don't know how they'd finance it. Without some sort of government assistance, they say, it wouldn't be feasible.

"Every level of government ... is saying all they want is local food production," says Chad. "But there are so many barriers."

This is one in a series of stories about issues affecting southwestern Ontario. It's brought to you with the assistance of faculty and students from Western University's Faculty of Information and Media Studies.

Ontario Hubs are made possible by the Barry and Laurie Green Family Charitable Trust & Goldie Feldman.

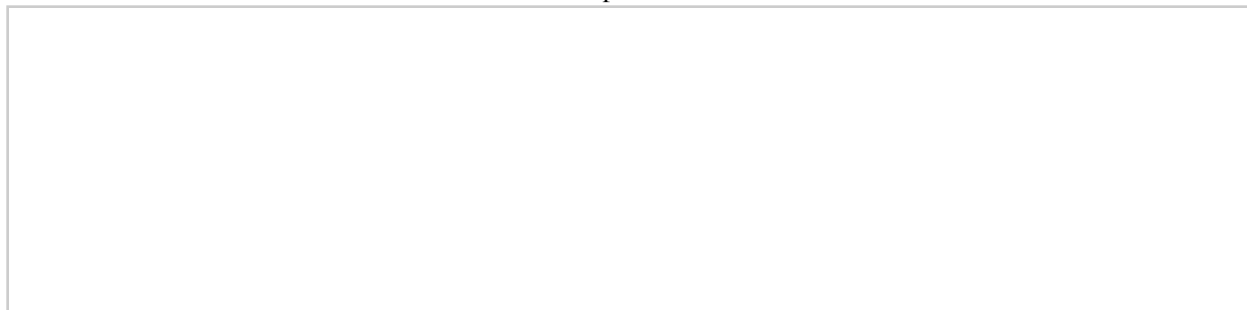
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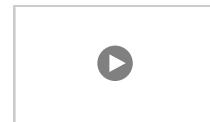
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