

By Ann Slater,
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This summer a discussion arose on the Beyond Factory Farming Coalition listserv, with several writers, including some key members of the organic community, suggesting marketing boards have become the major obstacle to the growth of sustainable agriculture in Canada. Some writers suggested that although supply management may have served a purpose at one time, it is now just a barrier to new entrants, and to potential organic and niche opportunities.

I agree there need to be changes within supply management to better facilitate niche and organic production, and to make it possible for new and young farmers to produce and sell milk, chicken, eggs or turkey. However, I also believe supply management along with the marketing boards that run it, is needed as much today as when it was started to keep smaller, more sustainable farms, organic and conventional, alive in the countryside. When I drive the back roads of my neighbourhood, I still see a number of small, family run dairy farms, which are the major source of income for the family. All of these dairy farms require a significant amount of pasture and/or hay, therefore, much of the farm is planted to perennial crops, along with smaller amounts of small grains and corn. This is in contrast to most of the land on the back roads of my neighbourhood which grow corn for several years followed by soybeans and an occasional crop of wheat.

Without the marketing boards that give small farmers the collective power to negotiate prices with a couple of powerful, multinational processors, I doubt that most of those small dairy farms, would continue to exist. They would be replaced by fields of corn to feed the energy inefficient, highly subsidized, fast growing ethanol industry. I do not see how such changes would make farming in my neighbourhood more sustainable. The average size dairy herd in Ontario is still well under 100 cows, significantly smaller than the average size dairy herds in most states. Similarly, chicken and egg farms in Ontario are smaller than, and more likely to be owned and controlled by farmers, than their counterparts in the US.

I grew up hearing stories of tractor parades and baby bottles with stickers on them that read something like 'stop the dumping of cheap Irish milk'. Supply management was born out of a desire of small farmers to make a living on the farm by getting a fair price for their products and to provide local eaters with local food. While much has changed since then, including tremendous consolidation in the processing industry, for the most part Ontario people drink Ontario milk and eat Ontario chicken and eggs whether they buy their food at a local health food store, a mega-supermarket or a multi-national fast food outlet. It is not just the committed local and organic eaters, that we as direct marketers and organic farmers, see on a regular basis consuming Ontario food but the majority of the public who simply buy their food at the most convenient or cheapest location.

Marketing boards are made up of farmers elected to the board. I believe organic farmers have gained enough acceptance within the general farm population that being an organic farmer would not necessarily be an obstacle to getting elected to a marketing board. Having an organic farmer sitting at the board table, could be quite helpful in pushing for the changes needed to better facilitate organic and niche production. Hopefully in the near future, an organic farmer or two will take up the arduous challenge of getting elected to one of the marketing boards in Ontario.