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Close to home: David Miede, owner/operator of the organic Bastion Ranch in Tappen, looks over his herd of cattle. Miede says food inspection should be more accessible and less expensive.

By Barb Brouwer - *Salmon Arm Observer*

Small producers hit hard

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With a death of an Okanagan senior, the issue of food safety has moved closer to home.

Interior Health released information last week on the death of an elderly woman from listeriosis. IH notes the woman had an underlying chronic disease and was at greater risk for the infection.

"Further testing will be carried out this week at the BC Centre for Disease Control - Provincial Laboratory to determine whether this particular listeria strain matches the strain of listeria associated with the Canada-wide recall of certain Maple Leaf food products," reads the release.

Keith Boulter of Sweet Haven Farm in Tappen has been farming for some 40 years. □ He produces certified organic beef and takes it to Riverside Meats (also certified organic) in Silver Creek for processing.

"When I hear news items like this (listeriosis outbreaks) it reinforces my concern," he says. "I'm not against inspections, they're a good thing, but from what I'm gathering from the new regs, is they're asking larger processors to police themselves and making it onerous on small producers and packing plants."

Local processing is safer, he believes.

If something a local producer raises causes a health problem, its effect will be on a very small number of people limited to a small geographic area.

"Whereas (for the big processors) it's massive amounts of material and it goes country wide," Boulter says. "That's why most of us are in favour of local processors. We need hundreds of processors across the country, not five or six."

David Miede, owner/operator of the organic Bastion Ranch in Tappen, agrees.

He says one of the issues is that in terms of the larger processors, great quantities of meat are mixed up together and tracking disease becomes almost impossible.

"By being certified organic, it means there's a paper trail," he says. "With a number stamped on it, I can trace exactly back to what animal the meat came from. I can know in minutes where the animal was born, who its parents were and when it was slaughtered.

"It also means no hormones or pesticides in the meat, and no delivered antibiotics," says Miede. "If I have a sick animal, I treat it, but then the animal is taken out of the certification program. It also means the soil is protected and that the animals are treated humanely."

Miede says his cattle are out in the pasture, moving freely, choosing foods they like from the pasture, in contrast to feed lot animals that are packed in close together and fed grain.

"There's evidence that shows grain-finished animals don't have the health properties in the meat that grass-finished animals do," he says. "My meat will be a lot higher in Omega 3 fatty acids for example."

Miede also notes that grain-finished beef have a higher E-coli count in their feces, which is where this contamination comes from – wherever the bacteria comes in contact with the meat.

"I made the choice to have my meat inspected before it became a regulation and that's part of me having the confidence that when I hand you a steak to feed your children, I know I've done my best to make sure that it's safe," he says, adamantly supporting the concept of a 100-mile diet. "What the message has to be is that food inspection helps make it safer for food consumption, but it has to be more accessible and less expensive."

Shelley Baumbrough of Deerfoot Farm in Spallumcheen used to raise 2,500 chickens for slaughter. Now, through a special permit, she is allowed to raise 3,000 kg live weight of birds, which are processed by a portable abattoir.

Like Boulter and Miede, she is opposed to large-scale food processing.

"This whole movement to small local food production is of even greater value now," she says noting she has a waiting list for her organic birds that she cannot begin to meet. "Maybe what we need to start doing is saying, 'you know who your doctor is, you know who your accountant is, but do you know who your farmer is?'"

She says a CFIA agent was onsite for one of the slaughter days and gave her operation "wonderful reviews."

"That speaks highly of small-scale agriculture and the product produced," she says.

"The consumer wants it, the demand is overwhelming and I think the government needs to respect that demand. As it stands now the costs are making healthy food prohibitively expensive, especially for low-income people."