

Brinkley, Shank are small farmers' friends

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Every Saturday and Sunday morning, tens of thousands of Marylanders wake up early, pile their kids into the car and do something that just 10 years ago was almost unheard of: They go to the farmers market. They go to meet the people who raise their food, and they go because the food tastes the way it's supposed to taste -- the way it did for our grandparents, when almost all food came straight from the farm.

Families across our state -- not to mention from D.C., Virginia and around the region -- are getting more and more of their groceries this way. This is big business for our region's small farmers: Last year, Fresh Farm Markets alone brought in over \$6 million for the 11 farmers markets they manage.

Farmers markets have become a huge boon to small family farms in Maryland, and they've given conscious consumers options they never had before. In Maryland, we are lucky to have over 100 farmers markets.

But while the markets overflow every spring with fresh vegetables, fruits and eggs, there are some things conspicuously underrepresented: locally raised poultry and rabbit. Well, thanks to Sen. David Brinkley, R-Frederick/Carroll, and Delegate Christopher Shank, R-Washington, that is about to change.

Chicken is without a doubt the most popular protein in America, and consumers increasingly want to know that the birds they serve their families were raised and slaughtered as humanely as possible. Federal law supports that desire by allowing small poultry and rabbit farmers to process and sell up to 20,000 animals per year directly to consumers within the state they are raised.

On-farm processing avoids the stressful packing and trucking of animals to faraway slaughterhouses. So why aren't there farm-processed chickens and rabbits at your local market? Unfortunately, the Maryland Department of Health and Mental Hygiene had chosen to place an unnecessary additional restriction on the federal law, which effectively bans farmers from selling poultry and rabbit at farmers markets.

This might not be such a problem if independent farmers had another way to get their poultry processed -- for instance, at a U.S. Department of Agriculture-approved slaughterhouse. But it's a little-known fact that in Maryland, USDA poultry slaughterhouses are all owned by large corporations and will process only poultry from farmers under contract to grow birds for them.

Back in January, I and a small group of farmers from Frederick, Washington and Carroll counties attended the Maryland Independent Consumers and Farmers Association's lobby day in Annapolis. Farmers from all over Maryland served a banquet of locally raised food, including items that are otherwise illegal to sell in Maryland -- like farm-processed poultry and rabbit. We met with our representatives after the event. Brinkley and Shank were sympathetic to our cause and agreed to sponsor legislation.

Over the ensuing eight weeks there were countless meetings and conference calls with additional delegates, senators, lawyers, lobbyists, PR firms, farmers, farmers market managers, the Farm Bureau, the state agriculture department, health and mental hygiene department, and the governor's office. The whole process gave me a greater appreciation for the colloquialism "making laws is a lot like making sausage."

The bills (SB 912/HB 1070) received broad bipartisan support: 19 additional senators and delegates agreed to co-sponsor the legislation. In the end, Brinkley and Shank were able to get Health and Mental Hygiene Secretary John Colmers and MDA Secretary Earl Hance to agree to authorize the sale of farm processed poultry and rabbit at farmers markets and to restaurants and grocery stores, obviating the need for legislation and providing a fix that will help farmers this market season.

This is a huge win for small family farms and consumers in Maryland. MDA is launching a training and certification program in May to ensure that participating farmers practice basic sanitation and disposal procedures.

So when the farmers markets start up this season, you will see more choices when it comes to meat. There are a number of artisanal poultry products that you will likely see: pastured poultry, heritage breeds, milk-fed chickens, Label Rouge chickens, Bourbon Red turkeys, and pastured rabbits, just to name a few. It's going to be a good year! And, none of this would have been possible without the leadership of Brinkley and Shank.

William Morrow writes from Whitmore Farm in Emmitsburg.