



The Honourable Charles Sousa
Minister of Finance
c/o Budget Secretariat
Frost Building North, 3rd Floor
95 Grosvenor Street
Toronto, ON M7A 1A1

February 13, 2015.

To the Honourable Charles Sousa:

RE: Ontario 2015 Pre-Budget Consultation Submission

On behalf of the members of Sustain Ontario, the alliance for healthy food and farming, we thank you for the opportunity to contribute to the Ontario budget priorities for 2015-2016. We know that food and farming continue to be top of mind for the Ontario government, and would like to see the government build on past investments to strengthen and transform the province's food system – a system that contributes almost \$35 billion to the province's GDP and supports 740,000 jobs in urban and rural communities across Ontario.

Sustain Ontario is a cross-sectoral alliance that is working to create a food system that is healthy, ecological, equitable and financially viable. Sustain Ontario works collaboratively to connect members, showcase food system innovations and champions, explore and research pressing food system issues, and advocate for a healthy and sustainable food system. With over 80 members representing the diversity of Ontario's food and farming sectors, Sustain Ontario's reach is province-wide.

Over the past year, we have witnessed important new and expanded spending on key food systems issues, including:

- The implementation of the **Local Food Act**, including the recently announced goals around food literacy and the new **Community Food Program Donation Tax Credit** – which is encouraging farmers to donate more of their products to community food programs.
- Continued investments through the **Local Food Fund**, which is currently supporting 117 innovative local food projects across the province with a provincial commitment of over \$17.4 million, as well as funding through the Greenbelt Fund to encourage and support the broader public sector in buying more local food.

- The creation of the new **Food and Beverage Growth Fund**, with a commitment of \$40 million per year for strategic investments in the food and beverage processing and bioproduct sectors.
- An expansion of the **Student Nutrition Program** with \$32 million in additional funding over the next three years to support 340 new breakfast programs in higher-need elementary and secondary schools, including on-reserve First Nations' schools.

These significant investments, especially in a time of limited resources, demonstrate the province's commitment to building a healthy, ecological, equitable and financially viable food system in Ontario. They also show the government understands that investing in food and farming generates a solid financial return. In *Dollars and Sense: Opportunities to Strengthen Ontario's Food System*, a recent study commissioned by the Greenbelt Foundation, the J.W. McConnell Family Foundation and the Metcalf Foundation, it is estimated that for every dollar spent by the farming and food manufacturing sectors, an additional \$1.24 and \$1.47 respectively is generated in the broader economy, especially in rural communities where agriculture and food processing are often significant economic drivers. However, the returns are not only economic. A healthy, sustainable food system that provides for the needs of all of its members also creates social, environmental and health benefits, now and in the future.

We strongly encourage the Ontario government to continue to invest in these and other programs that support healthy food systems in the province. We also feel that there are some budgetary measures that will strengthen these commitments. We urge the government to consider the following recommendations to help develop and implement on-the-ground, innovative solutions that will build healthy, sustainable, equitable and economically-viable local and regional food systems in urban and rural communities across Ontario.

Local Food Funding

We appreciate the significant investments that the current government has made in local food. The Local Food Fund is widely considered by food and farming stakeholders to be a critical lever in helping to build the sector's capacity and to advance the province's objectives of increasing awareness of, access to, and sales of local food.

Unfortunately, the final intake of the Local Food Fund closed in January 2015 and there is no further funding committed to support the implementation of innovative local food projects. This will leave a significant gap in programming for small and medium-sized businesses and civil society organizations that do not fit the criteria for the Food and Beverage Growth Fund, and whose projects may not qualify for Growing Forward 2, given its focus on exports.

As a result, we would like to recommend the following:

- Extend the Local Food Fund for three more years to support local food and farming infrastructure, build capacity for regional food systems, and allow for more processing and distribution dollars to remain in Ontario.
- Future local food funding should be aligned with the objectives of the Local Food Act: fostering successful and resilient local food economies and systems; increasing awareness of local food; and encouraging the development of new markets for local food. In keeping with three areas in which the Minister of Agriculture, Food and Rural Affairs must set goals and targets under the Act, the government should prioritize

projects that increase food literacy and access, as well as local food procurement by the broader public sector, to ensure progress is being made towards the targets.

- Ideally, investments would also support the growth of value-added markets, particularly niche markets such as organic, sustainable, pastured livestock, halal, kosher, gluten-free, and forest and freshwater foods. This will promote the development of healthy and ecologically sound products and grow regional economies.
- Local food funding should be equally accessible to all players in the food system, especially non-profits which play a significant role in driving food system innovation in Ontario. Non-profits are often challenged to meet current requirements around matching funds and staffing, and programs should be designed with this in mind.

Food Access, Literacy and Education

We applaud the government's current interest in increasing food access and literacy. The recent expansion of the Student Nutrition Program is a key step towards creating a universal student nutrition program in the province, as is continued support for programs like the Northern Fruit and Vegetable Program and the Fresh from the Farm: Healthy Fundraising for Ontario Schools program.

These programs provide increased access to fresh fruits and vegetables and other healthy foods, increasing health and improving student learning, and help children learn where their food comes from (which is especially important for children in urban communities who may never have visited a farm or seen how food is produced) and develop food skills that are essential for them to make healthy food choices throughout their lives. They also create new market opportunities for farmers, which supports rural economic development and reduces spending on business risk management. Unfortunately, not all Ontario students have access to these programs, as they are targeted at specific, high-needs communities. We believe that all students should have the opportunity to benefit from this type of programming.

As a result, we would like to recommend the following:

- Continue to invest in student nutrition programs across the province and build on the recommendations from the Healthy Kids Panel, including the opportunity for supportive food literacy and food skills programming.
- Increase support for initiatives that create opportunities for young people, especially in urban areas, to be engaged in the growing and processing of food. This will help increase food literacy and access, and lay the groundwork for a healthy lifestyle.
- Continue to support programs, like the Healthy Eating in Secondary Schools Grants, that encourage schools to work with other partners to implement innovative projects that create a healthy food culture in schools.
- The government has been highly successful in achieving both economic and social benefits through its food programming for students by incorporating local food into the program design and encouraging local food purchasing. We would like to encourage this type of integrated approach and the application of a food systems lens to future policy and program development to achieve multiple policy objectives.

While addressing food access and food literacy among students and youth is critical to the future health of our society, we must also consider how we can increase food access and food literacy for all Ontarians, especially among vulnerable communities. To this end, we would like to recommend:

- Invest in transparent and regionally appropriate calculations of social assistance rates to include the cost of a nutritious food basket in all areas of the province, continuing to prioritize poverty reduction to ensure that everyone, regardless of income, can afford healthy, culturally-appropriate food.
- Invest in community food programs and centres that ensure access to fresh, affordable and culturally-appropriate food for all Ontarians while building food skills and literacy.
- Expand the definition of eligible community food programs under the Community Food Program Donation Tax Credit to also include programs that provide access to healthy food at an affordable price through subsidized infrastructure and distribution, but do not provide free food (eg. Good Food Boxes and Markets).

Healthy Communities Fund

Healthy, resilient food systems start at the community level. Many of Sustain Ontario's members have been working across sectors to create systemic change in their communities by investing in food policy development and partnership building. Systems change, however, takes time and many public health units are just now seeing their first successes. Much of this change has been catalyzed by the province's Healthy Communities Fund. This is the only funding available to health units that allows them to aggregate baseline data and undertake research that they would otherwise have difficulty conducting. It is also the only funding available to public health units focused on policy development. This \$16 million investment has benefited over 500,000 Ontarians through more than 360 different projects in communities across the province.

We strongly urge the government of Ontario to consider:

- Reinvest in the Healthy Communities Fund over the next three years.
- Encourage ministries, such as the Ministry of Health and Long-term Care and the Ministry of Agriculture, Food and Rural Affairs, to align funding priorities and collaborate on funding initiatives.
- Ensure that the Healthy Communities Fund is rolled out in a timely and transparent manner that is accessible to public health units in all regions of the province.

Supporting Environmental Sustainability

Farmers are natural stewards of the land. They have a vested interest in protecting soil health and water quality, protecting biodiversity, and minimizing their environmental impacts. That is why over 35,000 Ontario farmers have taken advantage of the Canada-Ontario Environmental Farm Plan program to implement more environmentally sustainable practices on their farms.

However, all players along the food and farming supply chain recognize that there is more to be done. The *Dollars and Sense* report notes that agriculture and food manufacturing alone accounted for over 565,000 terajoules of energy use in 2011 (compared to residential use of about 515,000 terajoules), over 1.9 million tonnes of solid waste (compared to 1.7 million for all manufacturing), and 29 million tonnes of Carbon Dioxide (compared to 11.1 million tonnes in the iron and steel industry alone). Investments that help the agriculture and food sectors reduce their energy use, minimize their waste stream or find new uses for byproducts, and reduce their greenhouse gas emissions would increase their competitiveness and significantly help the government meet its environmental objectives.

It is also important that we continue to protect Ontario's farmland. Ontario Farmland Trust estimates that Ontario lost at least 600,000 acres of farmland between 1996 and 2006, including 18 per cent of Ontario's Class 1 farmland. If we are to be able to feed ourselves and maintain our agri-food industry, farmland must be adequately protected for future agricultural use and policies must be in place to ensure that farming remains economically viable.

Finally, it is essential that Ontario continue to move forward on the development and implementation of its Pollinator Health Strategy and the regulation of neonicotinoids. Bees and other pollinators are responsible for pollinating roughly 13 per cent of Ontario's agricultural crops (with an economic value of almost \$900 million per year), and roughly 75 per cent of flowering plants rely on pollinators for survival.

As a result, we would like to make the following recommendations:

- Support, recognize and reward ecological practices in agriculture by modifying existing programs to prioritize ecological practices with the most regenerative impact for the environment and Ontario's natural heritage.
- Ensure that adequate resources and economic incentives are available to implement the government's commitment to develop a Farms Forever program to facilitate agricultural easements and other innovative approaches to protecting agricultural land.
- Appropriately resource the government's Pollinator Health Strategy, including funding for: integrated pest management (IPM) training; further research on alternative, ecological farming practices (including funding for adoption); monitoring pollinator health and neonicotinoid residues in soil and water; and extension services for farmers on monitoring and evaluating pest risks and increasing pollinator habitats on-farm. Business risk management programs should also be reviewed and adjusted to ensure that farmers are not penalized for reductions in yield or income as a result of reducing neonicotinoid use.

Improved Coordination on Food and Farming Issues

Policies and programs that affect and support Ontario's food system are complex and lie within the mandates of many different ministries and levels of government. We know that ministries work hard to take a horizontal approach to policy and program development, and there are many examples of successful collaboration (e.g. the Northern Fruit and Vegetable Program, the Student Nutrition Program). However, this is generally done on a project or initiative-specific basis, which does not allow for integrated policy development at a systems level. We would like to recommend:

- Formalized processes to enhance communication and collaboration between food and farming-related ministries, operating with a shared vision of supporting a healthy, ecological, equitable and financially viable food system in Ontario.
- Consider a strategic alignment of priorities and resources (e.g. staff, funding) across ministries that touch on food and farming. The Ontario Food and Nutrition Strategy, developed by the Ontario Collaborative Group on Healthy Eating and Physical Activity and Sustain Ontario in consultation with hundreds of stakeholders and key provincial ministries, provides an excellent roadmap to guide food system policy and program development. More information on the strategy can be found at sustainontario.com/work/ofns/.

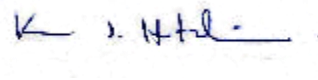
This government has an excellent record of taking leadership on food and farming issues, and making forward-looking investments that will strengthen Ontario's food system, for today and the future. However, there is more work to be done. We hope that you will continue to build on your past investments to help us build a healthy, ecological, equitable and financially viable food system in Ontario.

Thank you for considering our recommendations.

Sincerely,



Bryan Gilvesy
Chair, Sustain Ontario
Advisory Council



Karen Hutchinson
Vice Chair, Sustain Ontario
Advisory Council

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Sustain Ontario is a project of Tides Canada Initiatives Society (TCI). TCI is a shared administrative platform that provides professional organizational support (e.g. governance, financial management, HR, and regulatory compliance) to 40 social justice and environmental projects.

CC: Honourable Kathleen Wynne – Premier of Ontario and Minister of Intergovernmental Affairs
Honourable Jeff Leal — Minister of Agriculture, Food and Rural Affairs
Honourable Liz Sandals – Minister of Education
Honourable Tracy MacCharles — Minister of Children and Youth Services
Honourable Dr. Eric Hoskins — Minister of Health and Long-Term Care
Honourable Glen R. Murray — Minister of the Environment and Climate Change
Honourable David Zimmer — Minister of Aboriginal Affairs
Honourable Helena Jaczek — Minister of Community and Social Services
Honourable Madeleine Meilleur — Attorney General
Honourable Brad Duguid — Minister of Economic Development, Employment and Infrastructure
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