



# SUSTAIN

Alliance for healthy, just and sustainable food & farming  
Working across Indigenous Territories / Ontario

## Community Food Production

- **Community Food Production** involves shared spaces where people collaborate to grow, raise, and gather food for personal use or donation, or social enterprise.
- These spaces, including **land, forests, rooftops, water**, and other spaces where food is grown or gathered are essential for building resilient local food systems.
- The demand for community food production is growing due to rising food costs, health concerns, urbanization, and the need for green spaces.
- This policy brief focuses on policies to support communities in producing their own food, to remove barriers, integrate food systems into land-use planning, and prioritize equitable access to food-growing resources, ensuring that all communities can thrive through local, community-driven solutions.
- Strengthening community food resilience requires **access to land, technical support**, and **resources** for growing food.

### **Community food production contributes to:**

- Food security and self-sufficiency
- Civic participation and youth engagement
- Neighborhood revitalization
- Environmental sustainability
- Mental and physical health improvement
- Food literacy

### **It aligns with provincial priorities, such as:**

- Addressing rising food costs and food insecurity
- Improving public health
- Meeting climate goals
- Fostering social connections

### **Barriers include:**

- Restrictive zoning
- Lack of food production in housing developments
- Poor land management limiting access to resources.
- Inequitable access to land

## **About this Document:**

Sustain is a province-wide, cross-sectoral alliance of organizations that work through collaborative action towards productive, equitable and sustainable food and farming systems that support the health and wellbeing of all people in Ontario/Indigenous Territories. These policy recommendations have been developed through a participatory process between September 9, 2024 and February 7, 2025 engaging 90+ organizations, as well as academics who contributed expertise, across Ontario/Indigenous Territories.

This is not a finished product. It is being shared based on the election being called.

The process to date has included:

- A survey of food and farming organizations about policy priorities
- A policy grey literature review
- Multiple meetings among organizations in Sustain-facilitated networks
- 2 rounds of review by Sustain network organizations
- Review by academics working in respective policy areas

Sustain is sharing out this work widely, educating voters for the Provincial Election 2025, knowing there is more work to do.

## **Next steps:**

Sustain will continue to gather expertise and solutions in the months to come, building increasing participation and consensus on priority recommendations.

Importantly, Sustain will facilitate network engagement across organizations to work with all MPPs who form the next provincial government, and staff, to implement these recommendations over the next four years. Sustain recognizes and looks forward to elevating the leadership and expertise of organizations to do this policy work from within the networks.

To join this network, please email Rosie at [networks@sustainontario.com](mailto:networks@sustainontario.com)

## Required Targets, Planning and Evaluation

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### Key Issues:

- Food security requires not just access to food, but also the means to produce it.
- There are challenges to making public land available for community food production including making public land available for community food production, high taxes and rent, expropriation, development pressure, and concerns about land maintenance when it's not actively used for farming.
- Need for clear targets, planning, and policies to allocate public spaces for food production and ensure equitable access, particularly in urban areas.
- Municipalities need guidance on how to integrate food production into land use planning and track progress in supporting community food systems.

### Policy Recommendations:

- **Encourage Community Food Production in Municipal Planning:**
  - Mandate municipalities to develop and regularly update community food production plans, including targets for community food production spaces per capita on public lands.
  - Implement zoning changes to promote community food production, and offer tax credits for urban food production.
  - Identify and allocate suitable public spaces (parks, greenbelts, vacant lots, forest space, etc.) for community food production purposes.
  - Support enabling policies and programs, including edible tree planting on municipal land.
  - Require municipalities to report annually on the growth of community food production, with a provincial-level evaluation of equitable access.
  - Establish standardized lease agreements for community food production spaces, such as with educational institutions, hydro corridors, and conservation authorities.
- **Community Food Production as an Essential Service:**
  - Include clear language in the Provincial Planning Statement to recognize food production as critical community infrastructure and urban agriculture as a permitted use.
  - Designate all forms of community food production (gardens, orchards, food forests, community kitchens, beehives, etc.) as essential services.

- Integrate community food production into all provincial and local emergency preparedness plans, ensuring it is protected, funded, and supported in emergencies.
- **Provisions in the Provincial Planning Act:**
  - Identify suitable land for food production and restrict other uses on arable land, including housing developments.
  - Design new public infrastructure, such as civic facilities, to support community food programs, including kitchen spaces and garden areas.
  - In new housing developments, mandate green spaces for food production and shared cooking, eating, and storage areas in mixed-income housing.

### Existing Examples:

- [CEED Gardens](#) in Toronto utilize hydro corridors for community food production, demonstrating innovative use of urban spaces for local food systems.
- The [Thunder Bay Emergency Food Plan](#) includes provisions for community food organizations, identifying them as essential during emergencies.
- **Sustain Ontario** has recognized community gardens as an essential food service, emphasizing their role in emergencies.

## Prevent Contamination

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### Key Issues:

- For many smaller community groups, purchasing soil can be cost-prohibitive (especially when they need to build structures to support clean soil rather than utilizing natural, clean soil or harvesting from forests).
- Spraying pesticides like glyphosate disrupts the ability to grow, hunt, and gather food.
- Significant impact on Indigenous communities whose food systems rely on wild foods and medicines such as moose and berries.
- Water contamination further complicates food production by threatening the quality of resources essential for growing food.

### Policy Recommendations:

- **Prohibit Spraying of Glyphosate:** Ban the use of glyphosate on lands and in forests to prevent contamination that disrupts food systems, particularly for Indigenous communities dependent on wild foods and medicines.

- **Free Public Soil Testing:** Provide free soil testing for all agricultural operations to monitor and ensure soil health. Regulate synthetic fertilizer use if soil tests show high levels of phosphorus or nitrogen.
- **Topsoil Protection:** Mandate that topsoil removed during development projects must be returned to the site after construction or replaced with organic soil to ensure that greenspaces can be used for future community food production.
- **Water Quality Protections:** Include water quality as a critical concern in food production, ensuring that protections are in place to prevent contamination of water sources used for growing and harvesting food.
- Support life-cycle analysis of food waste management to ensure compostable material is returned to the soil to build and protect fertility

### Existing Examples:

- **National Farmers Union - Ontario [Nutrient Management Report](#)** provides guidelines and recommendations related to nutrient management and contamination prevention.
- **Toronto's [Soil Testing Work](#)** has provided valuable data and insight into managing soil health and contamination in urban areas.

## Residential Poultry

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### Key Issues:

- Patchwork of regulations across municipalities.
- Some cities (i.e. Kingston, Newmarket, and Guelph), allow backyard chickens
- Others (i.e. Ottawa, Thunder Bay, and several rural communities) do not.
- Many misconceptions about the risks of raising poultry in urban areas
  - Disease
  - Noise
  - Smell
  - Attracting predators like coyotes
- Concerns often result in policies that prevent residents from raising poultry (despite evidence suggesting that with proper guidelines, urban poultry farming can be safe and beneficial).

## Policy Recommendations:

- **Collaborate with Municipalities:** Work with municipalities to create locally adapted policies and programs that allow for responsible poultry farming in both urban and rural areas.
- **Create Provincial Public Health Guidelines:** Develop clear provincial public health guidelines to help municipalities mitigate health risks associated with raising poultry, ensuring consistent standards across the province.
- **Support Residential Zoning:** Introduce a provincial mandate that supports residential zoning for both rural and urban areas, allowing residents to raise poultry under regulated conditions.
- **Public Education:** Provide education for public health units and municipalities to inform the public about the benefits of raising poultry, including food security and environmental sustainability.

## Existing Examples:

- **City of Kitchener** has established a [policy](#) allowing residents to raise chickens in urban settings with certain guidelines and regulations.
- **Toronto's [Urban Hen Pilot Program](#)** tested the feasibility and benefits of backyard hens in the city, providing valuable insights for other municipalities.
- **Halton Hills** has successfully implemented [regulations for residential poultry](#) farming, allowing residents to raise chickens under specific guidelines.

## Beekeeping

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### Key Issues:

- Urban beekeeping is growing in popularity across Canada
- Significant ecological benefits - increased pollination and biodiversity.
- Existing provincial regulations ([Ontario Bees Act](#))
  - impose restrictive setback requirements
  - mandate that beehives be placed at least 30 meters from property lines
  - Limits beekeeping to those with larger properties, excluding many urban residents from participating.
- Lack of reporting on bee diseases and other management issues.
- Common misconceptions about the risks of beekeeping
  - Noise
  - Smell

- o Public health
- These challenges highlight the need for updated policies that balance safety, accessibility, environmental benefits and impacts on native pollinators.

## Policy Recommendations:

- **Rescind Setback Requirements:** Amend the **Ontario Bees Act** by removing the setback requirements in **Sections 19(1) and 19(2)**, which mandate that hives be 30 meters away from property lines. This would make beekeeping more accessible to urban residents, especially those with smaller lots, while still ensuring safety standards.
- **Collaborate with Municipalities:** Work with municipalities to create locally adapted policies and programs for beekeepers in residential, commercial, and industrial areas. Collaborating with municipalities ensures that the policies are tailored to local conditions and needs.
- **Best Management Guidelines:** Use the **Draft Policy Statement by the [Ontario Beekeepers' Association \(OBA\)](#)** to help develop and promote voluntary best management practices for beekeepers, including guidelines for urban beekeeping that address common concerns about safety and health. These guidelines would also help beekeepers manage issues like diseases and ensure their practices are sustainable.
- **Reconsider Bee Flight Path Regulations:** Shift from distance-based regulations to considering honey bee flight paths. Require beekeepers to position their hives behind fences or tall hedges (at least six feet) to encourage bees to fly above human head height, minimizing interactions with passersby.
- **Support Pollinator Habitat and Forage:** Mandate the protection and enhancement of bee habitats by encouraging the planting of pollinator-friendly plants in public and private spaces. Public spaces such as parks and green areas should be planted with native plants that provide forage for honey bees and wild pollinators.
- **Promote Urban Beekeeping Near Green Spaces:** Encourage urban beekeeping near community gardens, public parks, and green spaces to improve pollination and provide abundant forage for bees.
- **Pollinator-Friendly Public Lands:** Ensure that public lands are planted with native plants that support wild pollinators and honey bees, which will help preserve pollinator populations.

- **Incentivize Private Landowners:** Offer incentives for private landowners to plant pollinator-friendly plants on their properties, creating additional habitats for bees.
- **Measure Beekeeping Density Relative to Green Spaces:** Fund research to assess the density of small-scale beekeeping in urban areas and its relationship to green spaces. This research could guide zoning and policy decisions that better integrate beekeeping into urban planning.
- **Public Education:** Allocate funding for education programs to teach both beekeepers and the general public about the benefits of bees and pollinators. These programs can help dispel misconceptions about beekeeping and raise awareness about the importance of supporting local pollinators.
- **Turf Maintenance and Pollinator Gardens:** Review provincial turf maintenance regulations and encourage municipalities to adopt bylaws that promote the creation of pollinator gardens instead of traditional lawns, which can support bee populations by reducing pesticide use.
- **Rooftop Beekeeping:** Explore the potential for rooftop beekeeping in urban areas to address space constraints and enhance pollination services in densely populated areas.

### Existing Examples:

- [PollinateTO Grants](#) help fund the creation of pollinator-friendly spaces in Toronto, including bee habitats, in urban areas. This initiative supports local biodiversity and demonstrates how municipalities can promote urban beekeeping.
- **Halton Hills** has implemented guidelines that allow residents to raise bees in urban settings under regulated conditions, providing a model for other municipalities to follow.
- **Kitchener** has a successful program that supports urban beekeeping, demonstrating how municipalities can integrate beekeeping into their broader environmental and agricultural policies.



## Incentives

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### Key Issues:

- Need for targeted incentives to support community food production
- Particularly in urban areas where land use policies have reinforced social inequities, restricting access to suitable spaces.
- Municipalities retain control over land use and may wish to consider other uses for land set aside for food production,
- Clear opportunity to prioritize land for growing food.
- Public land could be better utilized for food production
- Private landowners and developers could be encouraged to integrate food-growing infrastructure into new and existing developments.
- Currently limited access to financial incentives, toolkits, and educational resources to help stakeholders participate in community food projects.
- Long-term sustainability of community food production, especially in equity-deserving communities, requires consistent investment and support.

### Policy Recommendations:

- **Add Targets to Planning Areas:**
  - Set a target for **10% of public lands** to be designated for community food production, ensuring a consistent commitment to urban agriculture and sustainable land use.
- **Tax Incentives for Landowners and Developers:**
  - Provide **tax incentives** for private landowners and urban developers to incorporate community food production infrastructure into new and existing developments. This could include creating community gardens, urban farms, or greenhouses that provide local, sustainable food sources.
  - Work with **OMAFRA** to explore better tax breaks for landowners and farmers who engage in food production, particularly for those growing food for community use.
- **Develop Toolkits for Community Food Projects:**
  - Provide comprehensive **toolkits** for municipalities, developers, and community organizations to integrate community food production projects into urban and rural spaces. These toolkits should include best practices for setting up gardens, orchards, and other food production initiatives, as well as information on managing these projects sustainably.

- Offer **public education programs** to raise awareness of the benefits of community food projects, promoting participation and support from the general public and local governments.
- **Promote Partnerships:**
  - Facilitate **partnerships** between landholders (both public and private) and community food organizations to create shared spaces for food production. Encourage collaboration to ensure that these projects are sustainable and inclusive.
- **Create a Provincial Fund:**
  - Establish a **provincial fund** dedicated to supporting community food production infrastructure, including grants for projects that build or enhance food growing spaces. This fund could be used to support a range of projects, from small community gardens to larger urban farms and food hubs.
  - Explore opportunities for social financing and community investment
- **Feasibility Study for Social Innovative Food Procurement:**
  - Conduct a **feasibility study** to explore innovative food procurement models that support, sustain, and diversify community food production, especially in equity-deserving communities. This study could help identify funding sources, sustainable models, and strategies to expand community food systems.

### Existing Examples:

- **Inclusive Community Grants** – A provincial funding program that supports community gardens and other local food initiatives, helping to fund projects that improve access to healthy food in underserved areas.
- **Halton Hills** – The municipality has collaborated with local organizations to integrate community food projects into public and private spaces, including public greenhouses and gardens.

## Technical Assistance

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### Key Issues:

- Several barriers that limit the accessibility and success of community food production in Ontario.

- Lack of technical educational materials available in multiple languages makes it difficult for diverse communities to access the resources they need.
- Soil testing (essential for ensuring healthy and productive food-growing spaces), is often cost-prohibitive, preventing many communities from utilizing this important service.
- Requirements of the **Accessibility for Ontarians with Disabilities Act (AODA)** are challenging to understand and implement (especially in the context of community gardens),
- Costs of making gardens accessible are often too high for many communities to bear.

## Policy Recommendations:

- **Provide Multilingual Technical Educational Materials:**
  - Ensure that **technical educational materials** on community food production are available in **English, French**, and the **next six most spoken languages** in Ontario. These materials should cover topics such as growing vegetables, raising chickens, beekeeping, maple syrup production, fishing, gathering wild foods, and cultivating nut and fruit trees, berries, etc. This would help ensure that diverse communities have the resources they need to engage in and sustain food production projects.
- **Support Soil Testing Policies:**
  - Develop and support **soil testing policies** that enable community gardening projects, particularly for low-income or underserved areas. These policies should address cost barriers and make soil testing more accessible to community gardeners.
  - Create a standardized **process for soil testing** that establishes clear guidelines for healthy soil conditions, ensuring that community gardens have the best possible foundation for growth.
- **Implement AODA Standards for Community Gardens:**
  - Provide funding and support for communities to **develop and implement AODA-compliant standards** for both new and retrofitted community gardens. This should apply to both **public and private property**, ensuring that community food production spaces are accessible to all individuals, including those with disabilities.
  - Fund training and resources to help community groups understand AODA requirements in the context of community gardens and provide practical solutions for overcoming implementation challenges.

## Existing Examples:

- **Ontario Ministry of Agriculture, Food and Rural Affairs (OMAFRA)** provides resources and technical assistance on agriculture and food production; however, these should be expanded to cover more languages and broader topics relevant to community food production.
- **Community Gardens in Toronto** have made efforts to implement AODA standards, such as raised garden beds and accessible pathways, to make urban gardening more inclusive for people with disabilities.
- **Inclusive Community Grants** can be leveraged to support the implementation of AODA-compliant garden features in existing and new community food projects, ensuring that these spaces are accessible to everyone.

## Recommended or Consulted Sources

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*Policy Recommendations were identified through a participatory process with organizations and groups in Sustain's Network.*

### [2020 Policy Statement under the Provincial Planning Act](#)

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The Systems Approach to Healthy Community Using LSU AgCenter Resources and Leadership. LSU AgCenter. (2013, February). <https://www.lsuagcenter.com/~media/system/2/5/7/5/25753f4491634f8edb93a0dad02b4742/anr-2419pdf.pdf>

## Appendix A: Case Study for Community Food Production

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The [Petersburg Garden](#) in Waterloo Region offers a solution, where farmers rent land, provide their own inputs, and have the autonomy to manage their produce. This model aims for economic sustainability without relying on public funds.

## Appendix B: Backyard Chickens: Existing By-Laws and Recommendations

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[City of Kitchener:](#)

[Toronto Urban Hen Pilot Program Recommendations](#)

[Halton Hills:](#)

[Article about Patchwork of Bylaws](#)

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