

Written Submission for the Ontario Pre-Budget Consultations in Advance of the 2026 Budget

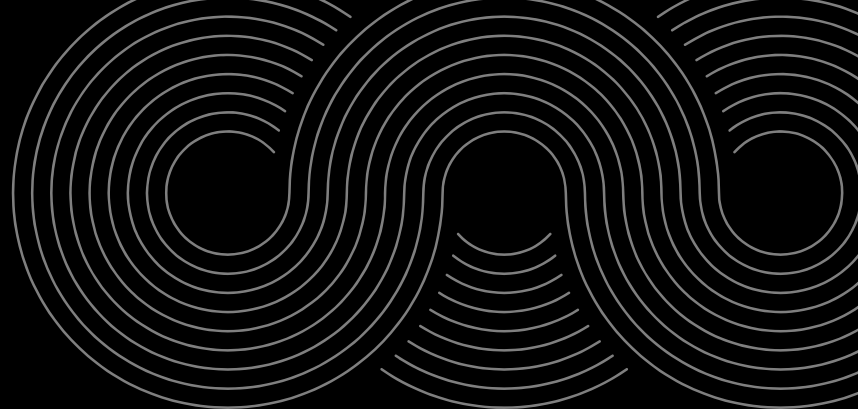


SUSTAIN

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



TABLE OF CONTENTS



INTRODUCTION	1
2026 - 2027 BUDGET REQUESTS	
Grow Ontario's Local Food Economy	3
Grow Ontario's New Farmers	5
Grow Ontario's Community Food Production	8
BACKGROUND INFORMATION	
Local Food Economy	10
Community Food Production	12
New Farmers	13

Introduction

Grow Ontario's Food

OMAF's *Grow Ontario Strategy* sets a target of increasing the production of food grown and prepared in Ontario by 30% by 2032.

Achieving this goal requires immediate, dedicated investments into Ontario's **Local Food Economy**, into **New Farmers**, and into **Community Food Production**.

With food price inflation and U.S. imposed and retaliatory Canadian tariffs, people in Canada are both reeling from unprecedented spiralling rates of food insecurity, and are more invested than ever before in the source of our food.

Sustain Ontario is a province-wide, cross-sectoral alliance that since 2007 provides coordination across groups and organizations working for productive, equitable and sustainable food and farming systems that support the health, wellbeing and economic livelihoods of people in Ontario, through collaborative effort. Facilitating input across community, industry and academic sectors through networks, learning and policy events and provincial meetings, Sustain has drawn upon recent and past work to deliver these critical investments to Grow Ontario's Food.

**This submission is compiled from network input and
is presented by the Sustain Board.**

A vibrant market stall filled with fresh produce. In the foreground, a large white plastic crate is overflowing with bright red tomatoes. To the left, a wooden crate holds several large, brown-skinned potatoes. In the background, there are stacks of green bell peppers, ears of yellow corn, and bundles of pink and yellow carrots. A woven basket in the middle ground contains more tomatoes. The scene is brightly lit, showcasing the freshness of the goods.

2026-2027 Budget Requests

2026–2027 Budget Requests

Grow Ontario's Local Food Economy

1) \$60,000 x to 45 lead, regional organizations = \$2.7 million in this budget year

Working collectively to support Growing Ontario's Buy Local Food sector using proven strategies to rebuild regional food systems. This initiative would be managed through the Sustain-facilitated Buy Local Network, with funds distributed as follows:

North West (3), North East (6), South West (15), Golden Horseshoe (7), Central (7), East (7)
Most lead groups are identified in Sustain's website: BuyLocalFoodAcrossOntario.ca
and final lead groups would be determined together through this network.

Recognizing that each region has different configurations of expertise and organizational roles, each region will collaboratively work to determine how best in their region to undertake the following economic development responsibilities:

- Build upon and develop new relationships across regional food value chains, including farmers, harvesters, fishers, small scale starting and scaling food-processors, beverage producers, restaurateurs, retailers, caterers, agri-tourism, and institutional buyers, to do the following:
 - Determine the gaps in regional capital infrastructure
 - Determine what investment is needed to rebuild critical 'missing middle' in each region, including what the costings are for this critical infrastructure to support scaling up food to the region, and exporting out of the region across Ontario, and the rest of Canada.
 - Work with key regional agencies to further develop and coordinate marketing infrastructure
 - Identify regulatory barriers and solutions to those barriers in production, marketing, agri-tourism, processing, storage, distribution and share with OMAFA through rolled-up report via the Sustain-facilitated Buy Local Network.
 - Identify barriers and potential solutions regionally to public procurement, building on existing and developing new institutional relationships in each region.
 - Update the regional website, tied to the BuyLocalFoodAcrossOntario.ca website (linking this to Ontario Foodland website)
 - Support buy local marketing and public food literacy education initiatives in your region
 - Co-create with OMAFA a stronger Buy Ontario campaign
 - Become or continue to be a member of Sustain's Buy Local Network



Grow Ontario's Local Food Economy Continued

2) Create the Grow Ontario's Food Infrastructure Fund

Establish a significant regional infrastructure fund to support regionally-required capital food assets to increase food processing, storage and/or distribution.

- 50% cost-sharing for capitalizing new and existing for-profit businesses.
- 90% cost-sharing for non-profits or charitable organizations developing regional infrastructure needs.

3) Set both **regional** and **provincial targets for local food procurement** in all

Ontario public sector and public-funded institutions to function as an economic drive across the province.

2026–2027 Budget Requests

Grow Ontario's New Farmers

Practical supports targeted for new farmers are urgently needed

1) \$45,000 – to Sustain to facilitate and resource the Ontario New Farmer Network, inviting representation from all organizations at provincial and regional levels serving new farmers, including all general farm organizations, to deliver the following:

- Update & promote OntarioNewFarmer.ca and FindFarmland.ca
- Contribute to, review and format the joint training curriculum for new farmers
- Contribute to, review and format a farm mentoring program for new farmers
- Develop and implement new farmer recruitment to be used across broad networks
- Work with OMAFA to detail how Ontario can additionally invest into new farmers, with clear return on that investment, including:
 - opening access to all provincial/federal cost-shared programs to the full complement of new entrants (see backgrounder) and a broader range of farm operations, variable in size, structure, production practice, scale and scope.
 - developing a Foodshed Lands Program: Develop a non-market farmland acquisition program in peri-urban areas to ensure Class 1-4 farmland is protected with a priority to make available to new entrants for food production at rental/lease rates aligned with the land's food production value.

2026–2027 Budget Requests

2) 1.0 FTE at OMAFA focused on New Entrants

- Develop an OMAFA Grow Ontario New Farmer Strategy with further targeted action to support generational renewal and new entrants.
- To provide navigational support to OMAFA programs and services for new entrants
- To work with the Ontario New Farmer Network to develop the strategy.

3) \$560,000 (7 x \$80,000 including salary, MERCs, admin) – to regionally-based organizations, building upon, and adding to those, who have predominantly and historically served the diversity of farmers in that region, to support new farmers in the North (\$160,000 split across key hubs), east (\$80,000), east central (\$80,000), GTA/south (\$240,000).

Specific independent organizations would be identified together through the Ontario New Farmer Network, and each organization funded would have responsibility for these evidence-based activities:

- Participate in joint creation and offering of business training curriculum for new farmers, and deliver it regionally
- Provide hands-on new farmer training in the region
- Run a new farmer gathering in the region, focusing on both inclusion and training.
- Facilitate both mentorship connections and landlinking between new and established farmers
- Provide technical resources and referrals on new farmer business plans, regional input providers, farm/land leases, regional advisors, and regional land opportunities
- Support farmer-to-farmer regional communications

*There should be no stipulation that this be for new hires. Given the precarious sources of funding for work to support new farmers (see background), organizations must be able to support knowledgeable staff who do not have stable funding.

2026–2027 Budget Requests

4) \$85,000 – One-time New Farm Business Planning project funding to update and consolidate existing and previous new farmer business planning programs used in the province. Programming will be developed into a shared suite that is vetted by, and then regionally facilitated throughout the regional organizations.

5) \$60,000 – New Farmer Networking: Create a fund that provides an annual maximum of \$10,000 per application, to support 7 regional new farmer gatherings.

6) Expand the Land Transfer Tax (LTT) exemption to apply to unrelated beginning farmers. The LTT exemption available for within-family and corporation members should also be expanded to anyone selling farmland to a qualified beginning farmer.

7) A Beginning Farmer Property Tax Credit program: This program would offer property tax credits as an incentive to farmland owners to lease to new entrants who do not own farmland.

8) Offer at least one further intake per year of the **Agricultural Workforce Equity and Diversity Initiative** (<https://www.ontario.ca/page/agricultural-workforce-equity-and-diversity-initiative>).

9) Create the Grow Ontario Infrastructure Fund

Create a Fund specifically aimed at supporting capital infrastructure needed for growing, raising, harvesting, storing, and processing food.

- 50% cost-sharing for new farmers capitalizing new businesses.
- 90% cost-sharing for non-profits or charitable organizations developing community farms with incubation components, including greenhouses and growing spaces for training and supporting business start-ups.
- 100% grant funding to non-profit or charitable organizations supporting household food security through community food production.

2026–2027 Budget Requests

Grow Ontario's Ability to Grow our Own Food

1) 1.0 FTE within OMAFA in 2026–2027 to focus on supporting municipalities and community organizations across Ontario to prioritize Community Food Production.

This position would work to:

- Provide technical support to lower-tier governments and community organizations on municipal planning, zoning and public land use to maximize community food production.
- Provide technical support on AODA compliant garden infrastructure and training, linking to funds available to support this infrastructure.
- Set up a tax incentive program for private landowners and developers to increase access to land for community food production.
- Mandate municipalities to develop and update community food production plans with an inventory of existing initiatives and per capita targets on public lands, with annual reporting
- Provide technical support including a standardized lease agreement template that supports both public landowners and growers/community organizations taking on initiatives on public lands.
- Set up a pilot free public soil testing program for non-profit or charitable community food production operations and evaluate it.
- Require developers to follow good topsoil protection and replacement practices during development.
- Feed into the Grow Ontario's Food Infrastructure fund as identified below.

2) Create the Grow Ontario's Food Infrastructure Fund

As part of this fund, allow for capital infrastructure funds for both non-profit and charitable organizations operating nonprofit community food production initiatives. These grants should be offered on a full-funding (not cost-sharing) basis, supporting household food security through community food production.



Background Information

Grow Ontario's Local Food Economy: Background Information

Ontario is in a critical buy local moment shaped by rising food costs, supply chain disruptions, and increasing concern about domestic food security and affordability. These pressures have intensified broad-based interest in strengthening Ontario's local food economy and using public policy tools to support domestic production, processing, and distribution. This direction is reflected in OMAFA's Grow Ontario Strategy, which sets a target of increasing the production of food grown and prepared in Ontario by 30% by 2032, and in recent provincial and federal actions aimed at reinforcing domestic agri-food systems.

Sustain Ontario's Buy Local Food directions are grounded in a province-wide, participatory policy development process involving over 90 organizations across Ontario. The work identifies persistent structural constraints that limit Ontario's ability to operationalize Buy Local commitments, even where policy intent and procurement authority already exist. Sustain's current and past network research shows that Buy Local experts across the province identify that strengthening local food economies requires coordinated investment across the value chain, not procurement preference alone.

Key issues identified through Sustain's Buy Local Food policy work

Sustain Ontario's Buy Local Food policy identifies several interrelated constraints that continue to limit Ontario's local food economy.

These include:

- insufficient regional food processing, aggregation, storage, and distribution infrastructure to meet institutional demand;
- limited coordination across the value chain to align producers, processors, distributors, and buyers;
- regulatory frameworks that disproportionately burden small and medium-scale food businesses and regional processors;
- procurement systems that lack the relationships, data, and facilitation required to source Ontario-grown and Ontario-made food consistently.

Public institutions such as hospitals, schools, universities, and long-term care homes represent stable and significant food purchasers with the potential to anchor regional food economies. However, Sustain's policy work shows that many regions lack the infrastructure and coordination required for institutions to reliably access local food at scale. As a result, Buy Local commitments have not yet translated into consistent changes in purchasing patterns across the public sector.

Grow Ontario's Local Food Economy: Background Information

Pathways Forward

The Buy Ontario Act (2025) establishes a legislative framework that enables the use of public sector procurement to support Ontario businesses and strengthen domestic supply chains. The Act authorizes the Management Board of Cabinet to issue procurement directives that may require or permit public sector entities to give preference to Ontario-made goods and services, including through eligibility requirements, scoring preferences, or procurement restrictions.

This authority creates a clear implementation pathway for Buy Local Food objectives. However, Sustain's Buy Local Food network directions underscore that procurement directives alone cannot deliver increased local purchasing without parallel investment in regional food system capacity. Institutions cannot source Ontario-made food at scale where production, processing, aggregation, storage, and distribution infrastructure is insufficient or where coordination across the value chain is lacking.

Recent government investments reinforce this conclusion. In 2026, Canada and Ontario announced a \$20 million joint investment to protect local farmers and agribusinesses, signalling recognition that domestic food systems require public investment to strengthen resilience and viability. While this investment supports producers and agri-food businesses, it does not address the regional infrastructure, literacy and coordination gaps identified in Sustain's Buy Local Food Network that prevent Ontario food from reaching regional households and broader institutional markets.

Identified gaps requiring investment

There is a clear gap between Buy Local policy intent, procurement authority, and on-the-ground feasibility. While the Buy Ontario Act enables public sector preference for Ontario-made food and recent federal-provincial investments support farmers and agribusinesses, almost all regions lack the infrastructure and coordination required to operationalize these policies.

Targeted investment is needed to support regional coordination, value chain facilitation, infrastructure planning, marketing and procurement implementation so that existing policy authority can be translated into measurable increases in Ontario food purchasing. Without this investment, the objectives of Sustain's Buy Local Food Network, the Buy Ontario Act, the Grow Ontario Strategy, and recent federal-provincial investments cannot be fully realized.

Grow Ontario's Ability to Grow Our Own Food: Background Information

Community Food Production

Community Food Production plays an important role in providing community and ecological services to urban environments, and will play a pivotal role in transitioning to a new international order in Canada and world-wide.

Community Food Production happens in shared spaces where people collaborate to grow, raise, and gather food for personal use or donation, or social enterprise. Including land, forests, rooftops, water, and other spaces where food is grown or gathered, these spaces 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. The pandemic highlighted the importance of access to fresh produce and nature for individual and community resilience. **Community gardening was recognized by the Province as an essential service,** following input from Sustain network members. Community food production contributes to important goals including access to healthy food and self-sufficiency, civic participation and youth engagement, as well as improvement in mental and physical health. When occurring in cities it improves air quality, reduces heat island effect (as a result of dense built environments), re-establishes healthy hydrologic cycles, supports stormwater management, creates habitat for pollinators, diverts food waste into compost production (reducing waste costs), and increases access to nature for residents in high-density neighbourhoods.

Communities are looking for innovations in local food production to increase food security, contribute to community food sovereignty, and create opportunities for skills development. Current political and economic turbulence only reinforces the need for strengthening Ontario's home-grown food system. **Strengthening community food resilience requires access to land, technical support, and resources for growing food.**

Many Ontario communities have developed a rich tapestry of urban farms, teaching sites, and community gardening networks, supported by non-profit organizations and institutional programs that are exploring new food production models and how these models can support both food insecurity and food security.

Community goals align with provincial priorities such as addressing rising food costs and food security, improving public health, meeting climate goals, fostering social connections and increasing self-sufficiency.

We need policies that 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 Ontario communities can thrive through local, community-driven solutions.

Grow Ontario's New Farmers: Background Information

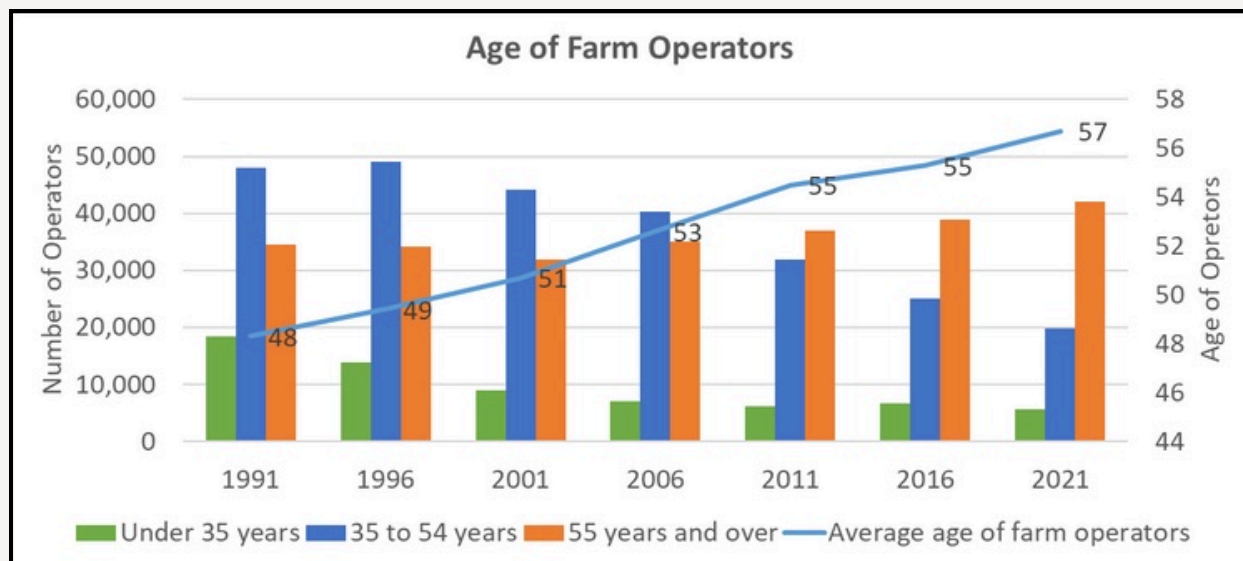
In 2022, the Ontario government introduced **Grow Ontario: a provincial agri-food strategy**.¹ It lays out a bold plan to meet the needs of a growing population for a more robust food value chain within the province. "Grow Ontario is our plan to strengthen the agri-food sector, fuel economic growth, ensure an efficient, reliable, and responsive food supply and address ongoing agri-food sector vulnerabilities through new innovations." Through Grow Ontario, we are working to ensure that consumers have access to safe, nutritious, homegrown food, now and in the future, and to ensure long-term, sustainable economic development of the agri-food sector.

One of the goals of the Strategy is to "increase the production of food grown and prepared in Ontario by 30%" by 2032.

Capacity to Increase Production of Food Grown in Ontario

In order to accomplish Ontario's goals and strengthen food security, we need to ensure that the fundamental building blocks are in place - farmers and farmland.

The number of farmers in the province has been declining for a long time, and it is clear that the farming community is unable to replace retiring farmers. Farmers over 55 years of age are the only group experiencing increased numbers, while the younger age groups have continually declined over 30 years.

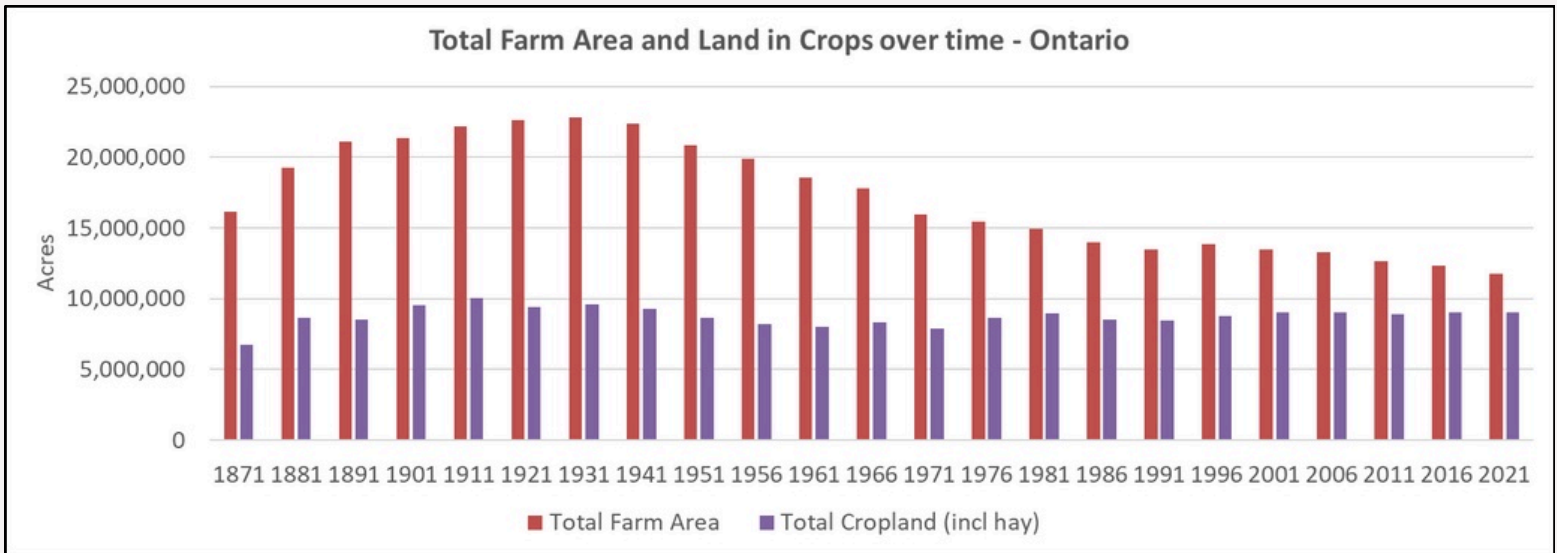


Source: Census of Agriculture

1. Grow Ontario: a provincial agri-food strategy <https://www.ontario.ca/page/grow-ontario-provincial-agri-food-strategy>.

Grow Ontario's New Farmers: Background Information

An ongoing decline in the total amount of land on farms reflects the decline in the farmer population. Over the 30 years from 1991 to 2021, approximately 1.7 million acres went out of production.²



Source: Census of Agriculture

At the same time, Ontario's population is growing, along with the demand for food. Statistics Canada projects that, under a medium growth scenario, Ontario's population could increase by 18% (or close to 3 million people) from 2025 to 2050.³

Taken together, these trends suggest strong, immediate intervention is required to achieve the targeted increase in production of food in Ontario.

Rates of planned succession in Ontario are low and succession plans involving non-family members are very low. The 2021 Census of Agriculture identified 190 of 5987 written succession plans in Ontario as involving non-family members.⁴

Research suggests that the success of the farm industry should not be dependent on intergenerational succession, as new entrants can reinvigorate industries.⁵ For farmers not prepared to fully retire or sell their land, partnership arrangements with young or new farmers can benefit both parties.⁶ Retiring farmers should be encouraged to consider new entrants and work to establish these relationships when a family successor is not easily identified.

2. Statistics Canada. Table 32-10-0153-01 Land use, Census of Agriculture historical data

3. Statistics Canada, Population Projections for Canada, Provinces and Territories: Interactive Dashboard, retrieved Jan 27 2026: <https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/pub/71-607-x/71-607-x2022015-eng.htm>

4. Statistics Canada. Table 32-10-0244-01 Succession plan for the agricultural operation, Census of Agriculture, 2021

5. Chiswell, H. M. (2014). The importance of next generation farmers: a conceptual framework to bring the potential successor into focus. *Geography Compass*, 8(5), 300-312.

6. Duesberg, S., Bogue, P., & Renwick, A. (2017). Retirement farming or sustainable growth—land transfer choices for farmers without a successor. *Land Use Policy*, 61, 526-535. And Cush, P., & Macken-Walsh, Á. (2016). The Potential for Joint Farming Ventures in Irish Agriculture: A Sociological Review. *European Countryside*, 8(1), 33-48.

Grow Ontario's New Farmers: Background Information

Who are the New Farmers of tomorrow?

Surveys and observations by organizations serving new entrants over the past 20 years, have helped to define what groups of people make up the bulk of those interested in becoming farmers, ranchers, and harvesters. They come from a wide range of backgrounds.

For simplicity, this report uses the term “new farmers” to include:

- 1) Indigenous entrants into food harvesting, fishing and agriculture businesses;
- 2) Intra-family new farmers who are successors to a family farm;
- 3) Rural and urban young people who do not have a farm in the family or access to land;
- 4) Second careerists (most often over 30) who do not have land in the family;
- 5) New Canadians bringing substantial agriculture experience, with a need for support to transition to a new climate, soil conditions, markets, food preferences, and sometimes language;
- 6) Temporary foreign workers on farms, seeking pathways to citizenship.

Each category brings its own complexities and compounded challenges. Within these categories, there are social-economic diversities that drive unequal access to needed resources for farming. With some exceptions, they generally share a lack of access to sufficient financing capacity to capitalize a farm business - due to age, equitable access, recent residency or other factors. Depending on their previous experience and education, many need support to gain the knowledge they need, make connections in the community and build credible business plans.

These characteristics have driven the work of organizations across the province as they try to increase the success rate of new entrants by providing needed support and programs.

Barriers to Entry for New Farmers

The price of food vs return to farmers

A primary driver in the loss of farm businesses, farmers and farmland in Ontario is farm business viability.

Supply management has protected viability in some agricultural sectors (dairy, chicken, turkey and eggs), and continues to be an important policy tool that has benefitted Ontarians. However, the cost of entry into supply-managed sectors is beyond the means of the vast majority of new entrants, and the market-based value of quota is adding to the challenges of even intra-family succession planning.

In other sectors, viability is affected by the role of farmers as “price-takers” in volatile markets.

While food prices in stores have skyrocketed, to the point of fuelling widespread consumer concerns over affordability, farmers over the long term have seldom benefitted from rises in consumer prices. While they bear the increasing costs of on-farm inputs, regulatory compliance to ensure safe food, and upholding employment standards, wholesale markets squeeze farmer margins and do not recognize the true costs of production.

These models are a major disincentive for entry into farming. It explains why most new entrants plan to sell as directly as possible to consumers in order to capture more of the value of the food they produce.



Grow Ontario's New Farmers: Background Information

Land Access & The cost of farmland

Purchasing a farm has become increasingly difficult for most new farmers. The price of farmland has been on the rise across the province, especially in recent years, as shown in the Farm Credit Canada table below (2024 FCC Farmland Values Report).

While prices have increased steeply in recent years, the price per acre varies significantly across the province. Prices in east central, eastern and northern Ontario are more affordable than in the southwest. However, regardless of location, buying a first farm is an investment most new entrants cannot afford. While new entrants coming to farming as a second career may have savings that enable them to purchase a farm and meet their needs for other capital and operating expenses, most new entrants do not.

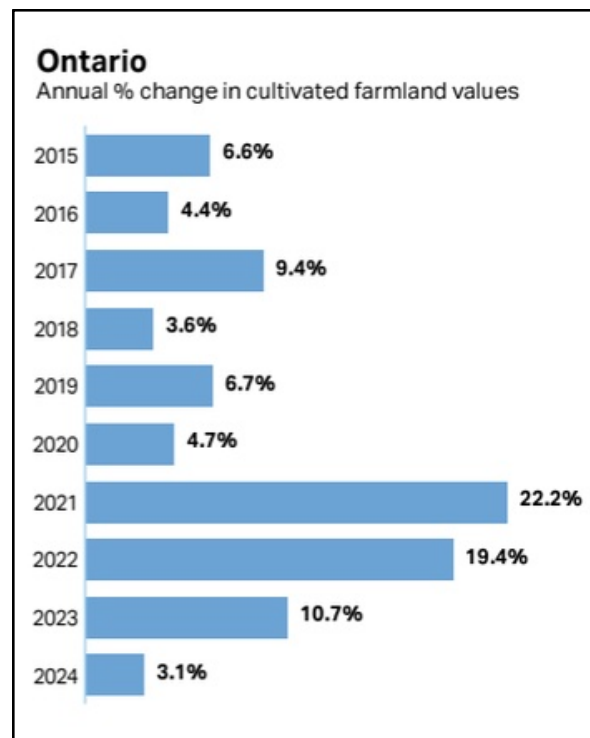
For new and young farmers, farm rentals can provide an opportunity to access land; however, in the longer term, almost all farmers want to own a home farm. Moreover, they require long-term secure access to land when building their businesses. It takes time to become familiar with fields, improve soil, develop infrastructure and processes and markets. Few farmers want to build a business in one location and then move it to another and start over.

Alternative land access arrangements that provide stability are not easy to develop. Searching online at [Findfarmland.ca](https://www.findfarmland.ca), where owners can post a variety of business relationships, talking to local farmers, negotiating robust long-term farmland agreements, and participating in community farm programs offer some opportunities for success.

However, aggressive change is needed to make farmland affordable for farming in Ontario.

New farmers have asked for support in finding available land.

They struggle to secure land tenure beyond short-term land access making it difficult to invest in production systems, support infrastructure, startup costs, and building soil quality.



Grow Ontario's New Farmers: Background Information

Find FARMLAND.ca
A Project of Farms at Work

Post a Property About Resources Sponsors Donate

Enter a search term Search

WORKABLE ACREAGE
 - Any - 1 to 10 10 to 100 over 100

FACILITIES AVAILABLE
 Housing Water Livestock fencing
 Livestock housing Electricity Greenhouse
 Equipment Storage

POSSIBLE ARRANGEMENTS
 Business Partner Business Succession
 Crop-Share Lease-to-Own Long-term Lease
 Profit-Share Short-term Lease

AREA OF ONTARIO

3 Fields to rent in Brighton Township ACRES 13 acres
Posted on Jan 24, 2026
About this property
Short-term Lease
LOCATION Northumberland
See more CONTACT

Roots Farm & Retreat is a community organization that rents land to small-scale farmers and welcomes a range of agricultural projects. ACRES 30 acres
Posted on Jan 22, 2026
About this property
Long-term Lease * Short-term Lease * We are open to discussing different arrangements with interested persons
LOCATION Stormont, Dundas and Glengarry
See more CONTACT

Ideal location in King Township 5 min from Newmarket! ACRES 3 acres
Posted on Jan 22, 2026
About this property
Business Partner * Long-term Lease * Profit-Share * Short-term Lease * Open to farming business propositions
LOCATION York
CONTACT

With backing from numerous organizations serving new farmers, Farms at Work hosts [FindFarmland.ca](https://www.findfarmland.ca).

This province-wide online bulletin board of farmland opportunities is free, searchable and connects farmland owners and potential tenants. It also allows for the creation of connections leading to succession or other business relationships on farmland.

New farmers have identified the need to provide incentives for owners of farmland to rent or transfer land to new farmers, especially those outside their family.

New forms of land tenure that permit new farmers to start-up and thrive need to be developed. This includes development of community farms and incubation models where community members and new entrants can combine practical low-risk experience with educational opportunities that lead to higher likelihood of success.

Grow Ontario's New Farmers: Background Information

Access to Financing

Many lenders are unwilling to take the risk of funding innovative enterprises, preferring to deal with farm businesses that fit into standard models and supply-managed sectors. This stifles change in the industry, eliminating a pool of potential farmers who would keep farmland in production.

Fortunately, in Ontario, there are a few options that have been created.

First Nations Agriculture and Finance Ontario has provided financial support for new Indigenous entrants. **The Fair Finance Fund** has, since 2019, disbursed \$4 million in loans to more than 60 innovative local food and farm social enterprises. By raising capital through community bonds, the Fund has helped these businesses to grow and thrive. **Inclusive Prosperity**, through the **African Canadian Farmers Fund (ACFF)**, operates a rent-to-own farmland and patient capital model supporting African Canadian and equity deserving racialized new farmers in Ontario. Other local programs such as **Starter Company PLUS**, which offers services and grants of \$5000, are helpful opportunities as well. Government-backed CALA loans are available in some cases.

Nevertheless, many new farmers are forced to start at a micro-scale that can be self-funded or turn to models such as Community Supported Agriculture to manage cash flow.

Financial investments are needed to meet the unique circumstances of new farmers.



Grow Ontario's New Farmers: Background Information

Business planning and Training

Building a business plan for a new farm business that will satisfy lenders is a real challenge. Even for those who can buy a farm at current prices, formulating a business plan that bankers will approve, and that relies on recently purchased land, is very difficult.

Long-term reliable funding for recognized regional organizations supporting new farmers across Ontario is needed to offer the business planning and training programs identified as most needed by new farmers themselves, requested at regional levels:

- a. tailored business planning for a wide range of agricultural businesses
- b. hands-on training on practical topics
- c. formal targeted mentoring by an experienced farmer
- d. regional networking and communication opportunities

New farmers have indicated welcoming online-training **IF** it is in combination with in-person training in their region. Siloed programs have been developed at organizational levels, each requiring sustainability models that are as of yet unattainable, with pioneering programs closing, along with their built knowledge leaving the sector.

Given similar topics and program objectives, developing shared curriculum/resources across broad provincial and regional organizations serving new farmers to then be implemented/facilitated at the regional level will:

- avoid duplication
- integrate expertise across all regions
- ensure new farmers benefit from farmer-to-farmer expertise in their own region.
- allow all regions to benefit from a sustainability model that new farmers can count on
- allow provincial organizations specializing in production, financing, policy to focus resources on advanced topics in their areas of work, thus providing new farmers with more options, more support, with regional organizations directing new farmers to them.

These activities have formed the backbone of community-based new farmer and business training programs throughout the past 15-20+ years supported for new farmer organizations and is what farmers continually ask for. Training has been offered in some regions in conjunction with site-based community farms, where fledgling enterprises are also supported with shared infrastructure and access to land.

No matter the initial scale of the enterprise, new entrants require support to create a detailed business plan in order to critically assess the viability of their proposed farm endeavour. While planning for farming is fundamentally similar to business planning for any kind of business, there are many specialized considerations that a farm mentor or farm organization must provide. Regional organizations are best suited to offer customized support on business planning specific to new farmers in Ontario.

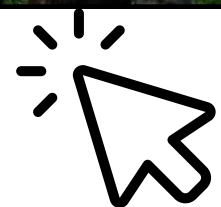
Grow Ontario's New Farmers: Background Information

Access to Resources and Information

New farmers have asked for one easy-to-access, up-to-date portal of information.

With backing from numerous organizations serving new farmers, **Sustain** hosts OntarioNewFarmer.ca, providing a clearing house for province-wide resources, acting as a feeder to direct new farmers to programs and services across Ontario.

Information on technical assistance and training, funding and financing, farmland access, starting a new farm, research and policy, can continue to be built upon within the Ontario New Farmer Network, including a shared calendar for events/training.



Grow Ontario's New Farmers: Background Information

Evidence-based solutions

Notably, Quebec's targeted investments in new farmers have helped reverse farm loss trends, demonstrating the highest rate of generational renewal in Canada and the proportion of vegetable production reaching 50% self-sufficiency.⁷ British Columbia's New Entrant Strategy has also improved outcomes for beginning farmers.⁸

In the United States, comprehensive supports for "Beginning Farmers and Ranchers" were introduced in 2014, contributing to a nationwide increase of more than 10% in the number of new farmers.⁹

Pioneering organizations have been leading the way in Ontario in offering support to new entrants for more than 25 years and demonstrating success to build upon.

Initiatives developed by provincial membership-based commodity and production-focused organizations include the **New Entrant Quota Assistance Program** of the **Dairy Farmers of Ontario** and the **BIPOC Farmers network at EFAO**.

However, the majority of initiatives have been undertaken by non-profit (often charitable) organizations focussed on food and/or farming in various regions across the province. In the Guelph region, **Ignatius's Farm** (Ignatius Jesuit Centre) launched its community farm and training programs in 2001, and founded the SW Ontario **Collaborative Regional Alliance for Farmer Training** (CRAFT) which operated from 2002–2019. **Just Food** in Ottawa has offered support to new entrants in eastern Ontario since 2005 and has operated a community farm since 2011. **Farms at Work** began offering programs to new farmers in 2010 in east central Ontario and is now planning a community farm. During the pandemic, **Ignatius, Everdale** and the **Ecological Farmers Association of Ontario** worked to offer online new entrant training. In addition, an increasing number of community farm projects are springing up around the province, aiming to meet current new farmer needs, and require support.

Other organizations have closed, not due to lack of need or expertise, but due to the lack of sustainable funding (see below). Everdale Learning Centre opened its doors to new farmers in 2000 and closed 2025. FarmStart operated from 2005 to 2015 out of Guelph, Brampton and Hamilton. Eat Local Sudbury operated from 2007 to 2018. Adding to these are a group of organizations who have emerged across the province in recent years, including **Inclusive Prosperity** and **Sundance Commons** with specific focus on supporting racialized new farmers.

Significant research with new farmers has been carried out jointly to inform programs. Research and writing in Ontario has also been used to inform work in other provinces, including the seminal 2009 "Accessing Land for Farming in Ontario", which was later adapted in British Columbia. **For a history of research and policy, as well as a listing of current Ontario new farmer resources, visit OntarioNewFarmer.ca.**

7. Gouvernement du Québec. 2021. "Portrait de la relève agricole au Québec 2021."

8. AgriService BC. 2025. *New Entrant Strategy: Growing B.C.'s next generation of agricultural leaders.*

9. Congressional Research Service. 2024. *Beginning Farmers or Ranchers (BFRs): Challenges and Opportunities.*

Grow Ontario's New Farmers: Background Information

Regional work is at the core

Much of the work of supporting new farmers necessarily occurs at the local/regional level.

Farming is hands-on and place-based. While online resources have become more available in recent years, research has shown that farmers want to engage directly with meaningful experiences in their community. This reflects the well-understood differences from region to region in:

- Soils
- Topography/geography
- Climate, season length
- Environmental risk priorities
- Distance to markets
- Availability of farm services

In order to be effective, Ontario's size and extraordinary diversity continues to require a de-centralized, tailored approach at a regional level, combined with collective and collaborative decision-making on efficient province-wide coordination of some activities.

Regionally-based organizations already operate in many regions of the province, the knowledge is "in the room" across Ontario to make a significant impact if minimal, reliable, consistent resources are available.

What is needed urgently today is a reliable stream of funding for new farmers and for the regional and provincial organizations supporting them.

In addition, regional pilots can generate evidence to inform province-wide scaling.

Grow Ontario's New Farmers: Background Information

Current funding models are not working to support the organizations serving new farmers

Organizations in Ontario that have focussed on supporting new entrants have been chronically unable to fund their needs for core operations and staff. Unlike commodity organizations with "check-off" revenue or membership-based farmer organizations, they have by definition not had a stable source of annual funds. They serve a constantly shifting amorphous group of people, who move on to being farmers in a variety of commodities and make decisions about participating in farming organizations as they mature into their unique farming model.

Given this lack of core funding, the traditional grant-based funding model used by OMAFA has been discouraging for several reasons:

- a. It has excluded funds for existing trained and knowledgeable staff who have precarious employment due to lack of core funding. Given OMAFA's consistent requirement to only use funding for new hires, organizations are essentially required to let people go in order to bring on "new hires" who are not as knowledgeable and require training. This is counter-productive and inefficient.
- b. Applicants have been required to have matching funds. This would make sense if they had core funds from memberships or "check-offs", or when allowed/relevant, if existing partner businesses have funding to add to the cost-share formula. As both are non-existent for new farmers, it is therefore a serious barrier to organizations serving new farmers to access funding.
- c. Funding also identifies agricultural industry organizations as having members, usually composed of farmers with Farm Business Registration numbers. Organizations serving new entrants do not, by definition, have such formal membership structures and thus have been excluded from certain funding eligibility.

Legislative change may be required to recognize the realities of funding in agriculture today, and specifically to adequately support new farmers.

To make up for this, funding has frequently come from agriculture-friendly, independent foundations, but the time for this unreliable, philanthropic approach has come to an end. The Ontario Trillium Foundation and the Metcalf Foundation are two examples of Ontario foundations who invested significantly into supporting new farmers, who no longer have that within their mandates.

Grow Ontario's New Farmers: Background Information

Considering the vast recent changes occurring throughout the agricultural industry in Canada, the future stability and viability of agriculture is dependent on new and young farm entrants as a core piece of the puzzle. These farmers face significant challenges associated with land access, capital and training which impede their ability to establish a farm, and organizations serving them face significant barriers to do so.

Funding must be established in the 2026–2027 budget for foundational support to new farmers across Ontario as an essential part of Ontario agriculture, and a key component to Grow Ontario.



To contact Sustain:

From Weeneebeg and Washaybeyoh, to
Akwesasne to Gichigamiin,
(lands called Ontario)

info@sustainontario.com