



# 10 Points to Transform Ontario Farming and Food



## 1. A functional definition of farming and food



One of the biggest challenges facing farming today is the myriad definitions being used by various ministries to define what, exactly is agriculture. Or, more specifically, what is farming. Despite hysterics to the contrary (“The only way to be sure you eat safe food is if you go into the wilderness areas of Canada . . .”), the food we eat is certainly healthy. A functional definition of farming and food (agriculture, if you will) allows for the complete gamut of farming operations in the province (from food to fibre to fuel – and all parts in-between) – including one that incorporates the phrase value-retention and value-added. Food (and the industry that is surrounded by primary agriculture throughout the value chain) is a multi-billion dollar sector, number one in the province as an economic driver when combined, numbers two and three behind the entire automotive sector when not.



A clear definition of farming and food would streamline taxation issues on a municipal side (benefit); provide guidance for the multiple ministries (too many to name) that deal with farmers, foodservice, etc. and a daily, weekly, or monthly basis with a list of rules and regulations that are beyond comprehension for most; and would allow for subsequent changes to how the sector both enhances and improves the quality of life for Ontarians – even those hundreds or thousands of kilometers apart from each other.



## 2. Redefining, economically, who is classified as a “farmer”



If the farming and food sector is to move into the 21<sup>st</sup> century, it requires 21<sup>st</sup> century mentality and tools (to be discussed later). A link to an antiquated past is the definition of a farmer in Ontario – one that was put into place as a funding mechanism for General Farm Organizations (GFOs) under the Bob Rae New Democratic Party government. The definition of a farmer being \$7,000 Gross Annual Sales no longer accurately reflects the real needs of the sector and is problematic for those farmers actively engaged in the business of farming to succeed.

Servicing most programs at the bottom of any sector lowers the bar on innovation, research, and programs that could be better geared at those who want to make a living from the land. The province has an established a line used dedicated towards the bare minimum of “living”; for a single person (2010 data) it is \$18,849 while a couple with two children is \$35,471. Why would a business, which is what farming is, view itself as a business through the sales of \$7,000 Gross Annual Sales per year? That is the selling of one horse between two property owners – and then the benefits of the entire farming sector are suddenly in play for those that would exploit the loopholes provided by outdated legislation.

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While clearly a more beneficial (for both industry and government) would be the immediate hike to \$50,000, it is not practical. However, moving the level to the same as the poverty line would give the government an established “bar”, recognize the sector’s concerns about the abuses of this definition of a “farmer”, and immediately have an economic provincial governmental impact in the hundreds of millions of dollars – and a hefty return for municipalities as well, who would see a taxation return from the changing of agricultural/farming to either rural or residential tax base. Were the bar for a farmer set at even the line of poverty for a single person in Ontario), this would have both a dramatic impact on the real figures associated with “agriculture” in the province as well as garner a huge return on taxation back towards the province. In addition, the gradual increase in the monetary definition of a “farmer” (towards a \$50,000 mark) would not only see future returns for the various government levels, but a working program towards the “business of farming”, and a more realistic expectation of what farm organizations are gearing their efforts towards. A study that was quietly shelved over the past few years did reveal that the amount of money spent by the farming community for organizational bodies is close to a billion a year – and a questionable Return on Investment (ROI).

This one simple, dramatic action would strengthen, not weaken, the farm and food industry in the Ontario and lead to a more clearly defined, streamlined sector and contributor to the economy.

### 3. Greenbelt The Entire Province



Obviously, this is somewhat of a strange premise from a farming and food perspective but what is required is new thinking to deal with the age-old problem of resolving land use issues, urban sprawl, and the inability of the farming community within the current “borders” to provide sound economic reasons for their presence, instead, turning Niagara into an area of “McMansions” populated by former residents of Toronto who are living a buffered life on prime agricultural land without using the land for that purpose.

Through the simple act of Greenbelting the entire province, what takes place is a revamping of planning for the future – including the one dynamic most never talk about during elections or otherwise, the settlement of new immigrants to our province. The provincial government, despite downloading of some issues on the municipalities, is responsible for the overall governance of land use issues (through legislation like the Planning Act, the Provincial Policy Statement, etc.) and many of the ministries (from Natural Resources to Environment to OMAFRA) are actively engaged – without co-ordination on provincial-wide issues.

By enveloping the entire province under this legislation, it brings together a more meaningful mandate to ensure several of the key points in the original piece – like preservation of valuable class 1-4 farmland – to be maintained and removed from future development. Despite our being the largest province in Canada, our farmland base is a very finite resource, one that will be necessary and required in the very near future.

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Legislation like the Greenbelt allows for forward-thinking – like farmers are engaged in, rather than the rear-window mentality exhibited by most government and business decisions (the dreaded “what if”). As well, such a move would allow communities not adjacent to the Greenbelt that want to get the same legislation in place but are unable to connect (like Prince Edward County, Chatham-Kent, and the Ottawa region) the ability to do so.

This is not wishful thinking, but also a logical step towards smarter planning throughout the province – forcing it, and its municipalities to begin the way overdue process of looking at how we, as a society, are building, what we are building, how it is being done, and working towards a co-ordinated solution when it comes to issues like farmland, wetlands, conservation authorities, heritage, environment, clean water, and all things assumed as a given by this society. Since the Greenbelt is, according to polling, a very popular initiative, well recognized, and something that residents – being both consumers and voters – understand, then the benefits of such a bold move would surely outweigh the perceived negatives of such legislation.

In addition, it will immediately provide relief to GTA and area farmers feeling somewhat limited and boxed in by this legislation, creating leap-frogging by developers, and the impression of sub or second class citizens, now doing an environmental benefit for residents seeking greener pastures while driving to the Niagara area’s casinos.

#### 4. A Rural Secretariat

The development of a Rural Secretariat may seem to be a redundant governmental agency (or body) but it would be vital to both the farming community and the rural countryside. Despite opinions to the contrary, there is a rural-urban divide and the development of a Rural Secretariat (one that reports directly to the Premier’s office, independent of the rest of the ministries) would co-ordinate all of the legislation with an eye to determining impacts upon the rural and farming communities. This secretariat would review each and every piece of legislation, removing the silo mentalities that exist in the predominantly territorial ministries, and ensure that the potentially destructive legislation is examined for the real world impact it will have. Had that been the case in the past few years (decades even), any number of items of legislation that have been passed that have greatly impacted upon the farming community in ways not imagined would have been partially or even completely averted. Anything from the newly created Endangered Species (with its failure to acknowledge the existence and impact upon the farming community – well known to rural Ontarians) to the Clean Water Act have created layers of unacknowledged red-tape and bureaucracy that continues to trip of farmers seeking to comply.

In addition, when there is legislation that could be a positive, this rural secretariat would be able to best direct the actions and perceived good as well.





## 5. Working with sector for the development, implementation, and base funding of an investment/infrastructure program for the entire value chain



Less than three years ago, the federal and provincial government, in an attempt to prevent the dramatic implosion of the automotive sector in Ontario, spent billions in taxpayer money keeping afloat two large car companies, while providing assistance to others along the system, propping up manufacturers involved in, but not directly related to, these two companies. It was new to this era of free market enterprise and the preaching of government removing itself from business.



What it did was help save the automotive sector in the province – but, in addition, it set a precedent which should be implemented within the farming and food sector: a need for an aligned streamlined strategy for attracting funding, investment, and retaining it; a fund for research, development, and innovation that recognizes patience is needed (blackberry plants take longer to produce than hard-wired technology like Blackberry); and access to capital for investment in innovation, capacity, and marketing opportunities – like the revamping of a new production line in a farmer-owned packing facility to make carrot or apple sticks for new school snack programs or to replace the imports on retailer shelves. And yet, none of this is possible without first doing a complete re-evaluation of the rules and regulations that govern the entire sector – hence the streamlining (see below). There is likely more investment involved in now for sale Metro Convention Centre than have been allocated to farming and food over the past decade – outside of safety net programs.



Over the past few decades, virtually all research and extension field work disappeared from the Ontario countryside – deemed an unnecessary tax dollar usage. Right or wrong, these investments by government in both people and the industry have disappeared – but perhaps there is an opportunity to come forward with something far more progressive. The reason why? Agriculture has always been on the cutting edge of technology – despite its aging population – because there tends to be movement towards new “tools” that can assist farmers in the field. GPS – global positioning – was being used by the farming community years before the technology found any useful application in today’s modern transportation system. Same applies to a number of engineered products – GMOs, nutrient products, plant breeding; all are done with incredible science backed behind it. Agree or disagree, it can be successfully argued that genetic manipulation has been taking place since Austrian monk Gregor Mendel.



There has never been a better time to return a scientific “team” back into the field with the latest technology and the skills to handle it. Making farming “sexy” could lead to the return of youth into the industry again – only this time, it won’t be generational but rather, interested parties.

What is required is a base pool of funding, through the Ministry of Research and Innovation geared towards the entire food value chain system that moves production forward with a mindset towards both domestic increases as well as exportation of a “safe, healthy, and nutritious” Ontario (Canadian) product – one that enhances the

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vitality of the product being sold. Whether it is increases in anti-oxidant material, omega-3 increases, or other healthy benefits, part of this should be funded from a government that is looking out for the best interests of its citizens. As part of the program, this could be a two per-cent adjustment from the Ministry of Health base funding, since this would be a pro-active approach to our system, addressing the concerns of an overly-concerned populous through better dietary products and mitigating, even alleviating, functional situations such as diabetes or coronary issues (diet is the number one related factor to both).

Anticipating challenges in farming requires insight that is only gained by increasing staff at the field level – something that has, for decades, been eradicated to the point where there is no longer reliable field technicians – and the understanding from industry that problems, real or otherwise, need to be relayed to the government through appropriate channels instead of voicing discontentment without the expectation of results. This is the generation – the techno generation – who will twitter, google, search, and e-mail advances from field to field. And this is transferable knowledge, something that can aid now and into the future. The next successful food-based product, like a canola, will come from the minds of Canadians – it should be from Ontario with its diversity in production and climate.

Industry would be key contributors (as would the federal government) in bringing forward such an initiative, but it would revitalize the farming and food sector – making everyone good corporate citizens. The time for “phrama” production is here, farmers are growers of health care already – but more needs to be done to bring the rest of the value chain into play with this, and government does have a role.

In addition, this investment/infrastructure would help bring around a renewal of the province’s devastated food processing sector – the importance it plays within the GTA and area. With nearly 50 food processors closing their doors in Ontario over the past three years – and more doing so (with all leaving for the greener pastures of someone else’s treasury in the U.S. or cheaper labour and environmental costs – in China and Mexico), the time has never been better for a re-engaged push towards the return of food processing companies wanting access to Ontario’s greater marketplace. Most forget the province, while home to 14-million residents, is but a jumping point to more than 26-million within a day’s drive – extending towards New York City, Boston, Cleveland, Detroit, and Chicago (to name a few). This is the Great Lakes Region – maybe even that innovative marketing idea can be utilized for expanding products to overseas, since this is one of the best known areas in Canada – and competing will be based on value-added rather than cheaper production.

Infrastructure is more than roads, surfaces, arenas, sewers, or more development. Infrastructure was not a \$3-billion adjustment to allow for contracted pensions to be continued onwards when jobs were being cut. Infrastructure should not have just focused on bricks and mortar – but instead, should have been viewed as what the original program entailed: sustainability in the face of economic and climatic uncertainty.



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The arena is an excellent idea, the exercise wonderful – but if there is no water for the plants and animals within the agricultural sector in Ontario; compounded by no water for states like California that are drying out rapidly, no water in countries like Argentina, Australia, Peru, South Africa, Spain, Russia – the list is growing, then all of the exercise will be futile because the society is merely running away from their long-term problems. Farming and food is important enough to garner attention for infrastructure dollars – and not the measly amounts being put into rebuilding old-dated, aging, and rapidly declining federal and provincial labs that no longer provide farmers with a vital technological transfer at all.

Real infrastructure dollars should be spent on irrigation across Ontario – to ensure that water is being used resourcefully, smartly, and that irrigation is making crop development proper in a world where food safety and food sovereignty is questioned. Is the water from grey sewage water – like that used by industry in China and Mexico? Is it poisoned – again, like in other countries?

Infrastructure dollars could have easily been used to repair and replace the tornado devastated areas in Meaford – and the apple orchards that were ripped apart. The reasoning behind this – that a replant program (whether it be vines, trees, or otherwise) is, indeed, true infrastructure providing for real sustainability. Finally, infrastructure dollars could have been spent on replanting programs that specifically target health and healthy food products grown within the province. Natural insulin, for example – even usage of research and innovation dollars in conjunction with infrastructure dollars to look at proactive healthcare based upon crop production. Infrastructure dollars could have been used at investigating climatic controlled plants – either drought resistant or moisture or even carbon absorbers. Most of the technology has been brought together by private companies – yet that wasn't always the case. Vineland is an example of how the entire sector – private and public – can come together for the benefit of farmers and consumers and should be held as an example of protecting the best interests of all concerned.

Infrastructure dollars could be used to enhance packing facilities throughout Ontario – putting the onus on government for a societal good: healthy food and food products. Infrastructure dollars could have been used to develop regional distribution centres which would have aided local farmers, enhanced food service companies, provided locally sourced food for consumers at the retail and restaurant levels – and been very environmentally friendly since the reduction in transportation and newly constructed LEER facilities would have been something to show government cared about the environment.

## 6. Streamlining regulatory regimes; enhancing tools

The number one killer of creative, innovative concepts from the farming community is the red tape syndrome, synonymous with ministry bureaucrats not talking with each other. In the farming community, you need permits for virtually everything – from





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water to signage (linked to direct consumers to an operation, like a Pick-Your-Own) and everything in between. Although there are efforts towards making rules and regulations more effective, the province's concept of "Open for Business" is far from happening on the farmscape. A simple example would be the fact that most farmers, grower/packer/shippers – those actively being encouraged to innovate to provide new products for consumption – are both unaware and unfamiliar of how a simple government tender for food functions, and that is applicable to the government as well, since those tenders for "food products" never make their way towards the farming community now being asked to step up to the plate to provide more local products in a widening range of public institutions. Buying from the province, even the second products that end up in our provincially run jails, would be a beneficial to area farmers, remove waste (either composted or shipped), and allow for movement of "imperfect" yet completely safe, nutritious, and edible products to find their way into the food system. It is difficult to grasp that a government so firmly committed to eating local, buying local food, making the "vague" connection to health and its benefits, would still be using foreign sourced companies, in long-term, virtually unbreakable tendered contracts, in this day and age.

On a final note, the red tape surrounding the selling of fruit wines is again being raised – although there is no hope of legislation allowing for its selling at farmers' markets this season. However, it should be noted that the prohibition of fruit wines at any number of venues, least of which being the farmers' markets, is problematic with the Open for Business concept being touted by government. At the very least, a test pilot involving a dozen fruit wine farmers, 50 or so LCBO stores, and more than 20 varieties should be undertaken from the May long-weekend until the Labour Day weekend to gauge consumer response, reaction, and sales. This again, points towards the introduction of value-added products from the farmgate side forward – instead of continually the focus on a raise towards to lowest price on a commodity-based ladder.

## **7. Connecting the Dots – Enhanced Foodland Ontario funding, the societal good provided by farming, and a provincial-wide food policy**

Every year, it seems, farm organizations in the province need to ask government that the program funding for Foodland Ontario remain but this year, during the "transition" to its new look (this past summer), it was noticeable from a farmer perspective, particularly on the farm gate retail marketplaces, that without this constant reminder of what's available, consumers were just not visiting. It is the one sure fire program that seems to resonate with consumers, assist retailers in moving "local" Ontario product, and provide marketing value to farmers at minimal cost.

However, there seems to be a gap within the programming that doesn't get acknowledged, and that would be the lack of enforcement with the standards of the program. Too often, those within the industry are finding it necessary to work to correct "errors" by store retailers in the signage of products from the province. This may about the success of the program – that consumers have been geared towards seeing this logo and being led to believe that what they are purchasing is local (Ontario) but it is often



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not the case with asparagus in January or peaches in December. Yet, examples and complaints about such “mistakes” and “errors” – and there should be an enforcement branch to this program, similar to the one in New Jersey (that polices the Jersey Fresh program), that penalizes retailers who fail to comply with the strict standards that are enforced upon farmers using the Foodland Ontario logo.

That great work by Foodland Ontario would run hand-in-hand with the concept of societal good provided by the farming community – the largest group of landowners in the province, with a more vested interest in maintaining and preserving their properties than the government or society does.

The Premier once challenged the farming and food sectors to arrive at a solution to the increase in minimum wage – which, ironically, makes us the number one jurisdiction in North America and will likely remain so. Minimum wage is a social issue. The Premier’s Green Energy Act has, as well, been turned into a social issue – rather than just about power generation, it is the conversion of an entire society into a “greener” mentality.

And that is the link for farmers.

Proposal: since green energy is now a social issue, counter the minimum wage under the guise of an energy deal. Put all farm operations (only) onto the smart meter system (at no cost to farmers). Set the established rate (since it is computerized) to 2.2 - 4.1 cents per kilowatt hour cost for farmers, year round, for five years to establish real guidelines as to energy usage. Conduct energy audits (at the cost of the government) to all farm operations. Only those farms with a farm operation number qualify (and based upon the new definition of a farmer). No main house. Power usage will also be monitored for all farm employee residents as well, since that is part of the farm operation as well. This is a fundamentally sound, no cost program that can be run through Hydro One rather than the “municipalities”. This provides two-fold value to both the farming community and society – being providers of power generation (and increasing that production over time) while be pro-active about power usage in an era of changing energy demands. It is complimentary to the “minimum wage” issues, the labour situation that is problematic (at times) for the farming community, and would make absolute economic sense since the labour costs become a wash with the energy savings. In addition, the boon is that, if this program is functional (as expected), then the natural expansion is into the food processing side of the sector – once again attracting a more competitive business enterprise which will look at investing in this area with a more favourable opinion.

This is just one idea as a means of explaining what is happening.

Farmers are the stewards of the land – an old phrase, but one more appropriate today than ever before. With the majority of the province’s population now three generations removed from farming, it is vital to show the true value farmers bring to both Ontario and nationally. Do that through the environment. Build upon the concept that farmers provide more than food – they are conservationists, protectors of the land for future





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generations, returning enriched oxygen to a carbon-filled atmosphere. Link the progress of farmers in ensuring that their environmental good is at the forefront of a society being traumatized by daily media reports on global warming. Farmers are making contributions towards energy, biomass conversion, protecting water sources, developing environmental farm plans that showcase and highlight the conservationist nature of the industry, while, at the same time, providing food and fiber. Farmers are contributing to the construction of new, eco-friendly automobiles. It should be noted about things like the hemp industry's inroads into developing panels for the interior of cars; ethanol production that is sprouting up throughout rural Ontario; and wind generation units and geo-thermal energy as alternatives to fossil fuels and coal-burning electricity.

Farmers are doing it all – and it needs to be marketed as such.

By linking marketing, development, environment, and a program that ensures farmers of today are able to look at handing off their operations to future generation, agriculture will survive, thrive, and prosper. That is not the case right now. Sadly, the farming and food industry is unable to get that message out without partners. On its own, each farm is an entrepreneurial effort. Collectively, farming and food becomes the number one economic driver in this province, providing more than 730,000 jobs. Again, a message lost in the chaos of day-to-day life.

It should also be noted that more could be done from farm organizations to recognize the value provided by the province's largest land-owner base – the farming community – and our enhancement of the environment. Farmers provide benefits to the public, society, in providing food safety systems, environmental stewardship initiatives, protection of habitat, and preservation of the rural landscape.

There is a pilot project operating in Norfolk County (ALUS – Alternative Land Use Services) that provides value to farmers, benefits to society, and a huge boon to the environment – a win-win-win situation in a time when climate change and radical environmental aspects are taking place in other countries. Put into place an expansion of funding for the Environmental Farm Plan (EFP – run in conjunction with the federal government), stewardship programs (like Norfolk County or as Lake Simcoe Region Conservation Authority did with the Holland Marsh Growers' Association), as well as a stakeholder advisory board so that new initiatives can be reviewed to see the merit and value of proposed projects that could, in essence, benefit farmers, environment, and society. This is the root of an ecological goods and services program – something missing in the urban mentality when they are benefiting from such ground-breaking legislation as the Greenbelt Act. There are too many examples that can be listed of “pilot” programs or environmental projects put aside that would, in the end, have more benefit – both economically and from a societal good – than can be listed, but, it would behoove all sides to sit down and discuss land, water, environmental, air issues with all stakeholders, even to the point of having public-private working relationships (in the absence of extension services).



Introduce a province-wide food policy – be a leader in this country which lacks the insight (foresight) to implement any national farming and food programs despite the sector being the largest economic force in Canada. This would unite both farmers and urbanites within the context of food, a human necessity. Both British Columbia and Quebec have similar programs but nothing that could be shaped within the entire system. There are many examples provincially that have started – but none for Ontario, the most diverse province in the entire country. A food policy strategy would look at the realistic expectations of food production in this province, the lack of food processing facilities, and the beginning of an economic recovery based in both the urban and rural areas regarding food and food production.

In addition, it is time to bring everyone into the discussion because everyone does have a stake in food and food production. The time has come for the development of a provincial food policy council, with stakeholders throughout the entire system, to assist the silo mentality government ministries understand that growing food crosses multiple yet unrelated areas, like health, environment, economic (even international) development . . . the list is endless. Consumers, voters, are turning onto the idea of local food (even if that definition differs from person to person) – and they want a say in what they are now consuming.

We, as a developed society, are so well off that we assume the right to question our food, where it comes from, even the manner in which it is grown and harvested. What a luxury, considering the billions around the world who go to sleep hungry every night because their nation(s) is unable to either grow its own food for its citizens or distribute it properly or exist in a regime filled with political/ethnic chaos. There are too many reasons to list for the reasons why imports have become so prevalent within our society – but the top and best answer is price, which Ontario farmers cannot possibly begin to offer similar, comparable cost of production to, say a farmer in an underdeveloped country paid less than a dollar a day. There are too many like-minded organizations, with the very best of intentions, not fully comprehending the magnitude of farming, best management farming practices, or the interpretations of farming and its various levels, crops, commodities, livestock, etc. These organizations, mostly grassroot, mostly urban-centric, are advocates that should be welcomed, informed (educated – with the bureaucracy), and then become champions for food and farming amongst their base.

Finally, government should put out a “seed” money program to assist the ever-growing number of “Buy Local” organizations so that their message, directly specifically at regions, such as Waterloo, Wellington County, Huron-Bruce, etc. is co-ordinated. Each group suffers from a lack of funding to bring together a proper program that could work in conjunction, even hand-in-hand, with such government ideals as Foodland Ontario or Savour Ontario. Including these groups that are seeking a better for their local citizens and farmers is a societal good that benefits everyone – but on a regional basis.

This, after all, is food policy at its base.

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## 8. Education – both inside the scholastic system and outside



All of the above would contribute to an excellent one-stop shop program – but there is a final component that needs to be added into the mix – consumer education, which would help catch some of the “errors” as mentioned. A major emphasis needs to be placed upon the education of consumers regarding food and food options, particularly at the primary education system level. Why? Then you are developing, from youth, a lifelong consumer, eating healthy, following a regiment that will relieve our healthcare system - a proactive approach to what we do. From the groundwork on the education side, then you would see the implementation of buy local policies within the institutions; greater interest in farming as a CAREER rather than a lifestyle (they are both); fundamental shifts in rural/urban planning (because more urbanites would see the merit and value of changing career paths from, say teaching [12,000 graduates for less than 5,000 positions], nursing [decreasing numbers, increasing graduates], etc, etc.). It makes people keenly aware that farming and food has a priority within the economic, environmental, health, and technological era.



This would allow for a number of initiatives being proposed by other like-minded urban organizations, such as:



- Plant urban Ontario
- Implementation of a province-wide school snack program (akin to the one run by the Ministry of Health Promotions in conjunction with the Ontario Fruit and Vegetable Growers' Association in the Northern School program), while embedding food literacy (Home Ec.) into the curriculum
- Ensure food security for all communities, while recognizing the link between good food and good health
- Expand public procurement of local food produced in Ontario
- Establish local food infrastructure through regional food clusters



This is no longer a blip on some media marketers radar screen – people, voters, are taking food seriously. This is a chance to grasp what is important to people (education, healthcare, environment) and use their own desires to improve an education system while building the economies of the farming community. In 2007, a study was commissioned through the State of California, seeking a review of what impact, if any, a full-time school snack program would have on its agricultural industry, given fair-market pricing (which falls under the U.S. Farm Bill – another country's treasury the farmers compete against) and access. What was found is that California would become a net IMPORTER of everyone one of its crops grown because there wouldn't be enough from the state to provide for its fellow citizens, its children. It would be a welcome predicament to have, for farmers, school children, parents – and this province's economy.



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## 9. A (perceived) Lack of Priority at the Cabinet Table



There was a time – decades ago, when rural and urban interests were considered with equal content at the cabinet table. It was a simpler time – or so the nostalgic in us would believe. The reality is that it clearly wasn't – it was a balancing act to ensure that proper priorities and solutions were provided for all. Farming and food, it would seem, have greatly diminished in terms of budget, prospective, and excitement at the Ontario cabinet table. There are two reasons for this – first, the farming community leadership has been absent, for the most part, and unable to clearly define that there are new realities at play in the provincial world. That new world includes increasing global food pressures from countries most of us could not identify three decades ago; greatly diminishing returns and razor-thin margins in an economic upheaval that has cost the province to shed 10 per cent (or more) of its previously enjoyed manufacturing labour force; legislative changes geared at appeasing urban concerns but greatly impacting upon the rural countryside – and specifically farming; and a consumer – ironically a voter as well – three generations removed from farming and now only beginning to grasp that food is an essential component of human existence, grasping at that “collective unconscious” that food, shipped thousands of miles away, should not make someone sick or worse.

All of which points to the need for the importance of priority within the cabinet discussions.



Farming is more than a greet and meet handshake photo-op when the need arises, usually during election time. Farming really does have a great news story – if it can be broken into its appropriate role within society. Farming is much more than food – it is fibre, fuel, housing, and economically viable since we ALL need to eat. Farming is more than finding food in a grocery store – farmers are health care growers and can clearly make a difference when it comes to helping the Premier remove the 800-pound gorilla that has become the healthcare budget from his back.



Ontario is the most diverse agricultural province in Canada – growing and raising more than 225 crops and livestock – yet that diversity has also come at a huge price. Most of agriculture in Canada – think Alberta, and the west – is generally mono-cultural and absent of the richness that this province offers. It is not difficult to think of terms of seven to 10 crops being considered difficult to grow. In the GTA and area (including the Holland Marsh), everything this province grows, harvests, raises, and sends to market is found within its boundaries (100-miles). It is this diversity that makes Ontario on the outside when it comes to the nationalization of federal programs – but it is also that diversity that should project a more creative approach to farming and food in this province.

The best way to approach this diversity within the sector is to acknowledge farming and food is now a major player in the province while the automotive sector continues, pun intended, retooling. Farming and food, which MUST include food processing, foodservice, and food packaging, continues to show strong growth in unusual sectors

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but still fails at the farmer level. It must be understood by the government that farmers' markets will only alleviate a fraction of the production within Ontario – less than one per cent of what is grown. It is a very powerful tool for usage in getting that face-to-face contact, but very seldom, if ever, can provide both a sustainable income and an opportunity for growth. While these markets are becoming increasingly popular – there is a pre-disposition towards them when there is a certain amount of disposable income, something not found in great quantities right now. As well, farmers' markets serve as a reminder of what was – not what is the reality needed to continue to feed a population.

There needs to be a new way of farming – given that the industry, as a whole throughout Canada, accounts for less than two per cent of the entire population. The question will be – what, if anything can be done to ensure that farmers earn a fair living amongst a sea of rising imports, against a backdrop of food safety concerns, and an overwhelming consumer desire for more local product. Buy local, Buy Provincial, Buy Canadian has never meant more for people today. Consumers recognize horticultural products – and the reality is that farmers and government should capitalize on that.

Farmers, growing a diversity of crops, know that the consumer is looking for THEIR produce because it is the assurance of locally grown, locally produced, and locally harvested providing today's educated consumer with fresh, nutritious, healthy, and safe food. And that consumer makes all the difference in the world to getting what you want. Most think they can't get that farmers' market freshness from their corner or retail store – but in fact, if you ask for it, if you tell your fellow consumers to ask for it, then it will take place. There is a gradual shift in this – and that farmers' market freshness and quality is finding its way back into your grocery stores.

## 10. Conclusion

At some point, whether it is due to a pandemic crisis or something else other than that, our borders will close, both ways, for food import and export. Ontarians will still require food. There are only four things human beings require: air – you can last three minutes without it and while we are polluting our air, no one is dying of asphyxiation; water – you can survive three days without water, and while we are polluting our water, no one is dying of thirst; food – you can survive three weeks without food and while there is hunger, no one is dying in Ontario of starvation to a large extent; and shelter – in this country and province, one can live without shelter for about three months depending upon the season, obviously.

But, with Ontario being a net IMPORTER of food, it beckons the question, when the borders are closed, when the countries whose names we can't pronounce stop shipping their cheaply produced food to us in order to feed their own citizens, what will we eat? A country, a province, even a region (as is being discussed at municipalities throughout southern Ontario) that cannot feed itself, cannot be considered a country – yet the entire Canadian food system is churning down to less than one per cent of the population that is still around to ensure that there is food for 33-million (nearly 14-million in Ontario) residents. That's farmers, primary farmers – and the more than 730,000 jobs in the food



sector that depend upon these farmers are also put into jeopardy. It is, as was discussed by OASC, a \$22-billion plus industry.



All of this evolves to this – while many provinces have developed localized, provincial campaigns, these are very limited in their financing and their scope. Expansion of these programs, using a partnership with the federal and provincial governments would do a number of things beneficial to society as a whole.



First, it would inform consumers of the value of eating healthy – thus reducing healthcare costs through dietary measures, a pro-active approach to our ever-increasing obese society. Second, it would assist in recapturing market share from imported products in an increasingly monopolized retail sector. Third, improving the economic conditions that could be measured for farmers gaining new/old markets would improve the overall economics in the countryside – with the idea being that boosting margins for farmers means passing along that wealth throughout the value-chain. There must be some recognition that agriculture, specifically farming, can be considered the backbone of the rural economy and thus bolster the fallen segments surrounding the massive manufacturing failures throughout Ontario. Agriculture – albeit now less than what it once was – can be used both domestically and through exportation to improve this province's positioning beyond basic resources and financial institutions found on Bay Street or in the Toronto core. Yet, most of the value-added, sustainable products are not being given the same consideration as other sectors, such as technology (think Blackberry from RIM instead of blackberries for enhanced anti-oxidants aimed at reducing obesity and cancer in our fellow citizens).



Finally, all of the efforts above could be dove-tailed into the development of a new rural secretariat which would ensure that legislation garnered at urbanites but having little or no real impact are reviewed so that the best intentioned rules and regulations impacting the rural countryside is, at least, abated somewhat, there devastating impacts – both socially and economically – dimmed in response to outside stimulus. Maybe the time for a local procurement program is ready for Ontarians – even, beyond the Foodland Ontario, a labeling policy reaching into the upper echelons of the federal government that provides our fellow citizens with real, concrete answers to where their food comes from. “Product of Canada” pineapples is no longer acceptable to a nation that knows its food is coming from somewhere else, with conditions that are not applicable or acceptable in this land, and whose content is, at best, questionable.



Adding to this agriculture's marketability is the importance of farming and environment – especially key during this time.

Helping farmer-driven organizations, like the Holland Marsh Growers' Association, gain access to new marketplaces should be the corner-stone of all governments – both federal and provincially – and the push should be from the ground up with assistance from farm organizations that are progressive enough to see value in making sure that their farmers are profitable. Those two words, farming and profit, should be allowed to co-exist in the same sentence without being viewed as a bad thing.

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Finally, if local consumption starts from the top down, more and more of our citizens will begin to see the value our province can provide – not just from agriculture but also from all economic sectors.



Farmers throughout the province need to have access to programs that provide a societal good: feeding our fellow citizens. It is what we, as farmers do best – and your government should respect our efforts to provide safe, healthy, and nutritious food products to a nation that is not even aware how their food is produced.



Throughout civilization's rise, the backbone, the root, has been agriculture. Cultures have risen and fallen around the availability of its food supply. Now, Canadian agriculture is the future for improved health and longevity of its citizens. Making farmers the endangered species they have become is the same as throwing the baby out with the bathwater.



It has future costs that cannot be determined – until it is too late.



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