

FROM THE FIELD

From our field office to yours – timely information for MPPs about Ontario's agri-food sector, from the Ontario Federation of Agriculture



*Keith Currie
President
Ontario Federation
of Agriculture*

FROM THE PRESIDENT

We've had a busy start to the year, with a lot of activity at a political level impacting the farm businesses of our 36,000 farm members. This issue of *From the Field* highlights recent activity for the agri-food sector across a number of areas – the presence in provincial and federal budgets, what we need to strengthen and support rural economic development, and an update on recent activities to reduce phosphorus levels in the Great Lakes.

Spring is a really busy time for Ontario farmers. The wet conditions that have blanketed much of the province this spring mean we are all trying to get our crops in the ground in a much shorter time.

The latest 2016 Census of Agriculture data has some very encouraging stats for our industry. Ontario accounts for more than 25% of all farms in Canada. Our farm size and gross farm receipts are increasing. And the number of younger operators and women are growing.

We have a busy year ahead. We look forward to meeting you at upcoming events at Queen's Park, at our annual Field Day on August 10 (see back page) and at summer events and activities in our rural communities. Our job at OFA is to be sure you understand the important contributions and endless potential the agri-food sector holds for all Ontarians.



The battle of the budgets

OFA applauds the recognition the agri-food industry received in the 2017 federal budget. The Barton Report identified our sector as one of the six key priority areas that bring the greatest potential to drive economic growth in Canada. The report by the Advisory Council on Economic Growth called for investments in agri-food to boost exports by 50% to bring the annual level to \$75 million.

OFA knows well the potential for continued, sustained growth in our industry. We are encouraged by the federal government, who shares our vision for the exciting prospects that will grow when our diverse and innovative sector is supported.

Unfortunately, this support wasn't echoed in the provincial budget released in late April. Agriculture and rural Ontario were largely ignored, with no new funding announcements for a sector that is widely recognized as a key growth area for the provincial economy.

"We were hopeful that the federal budget's focus on agriculture would lead the example for Ontario," says OFA President Keith Currie. "Ontario's agri-food industry offers immense potential for the province, with proper investment and government support."

The budget did note the 40,000 new jobs created in the agri-food industry, feeding into the Premier's Growth Challenge to create 120,000 new jobs by 2020. "We're ready to keep growing our sector, and we clearly have more work to do to demonstrate the potential of agri-food and rural growth to the Ontario government."

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FOCUS: RURAL ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT

Ontario's agri-food sector fuels the provincial economy, and here are some of the areas the Ontario Federation of Agriculture is advocating for to keep growing and strengthening rural Ontario.

Natural gas: the most important investment in rural Ontario

Affordable energy is a serious issue in Ontario. Rural Ontario is the hardest hit by energy inflation with most businesses, residents and farms relying on electricity, propane or heating oil to support their way of life. The expansion of natural gas is the single most important investment Ontario can make to support a vibrant and thriving rural Ontario.

OFA has partnered with industry and natural gas companies – calling on the provincial government for a 20-year commitment to invest \$75 million annually to expand access to natural gas across rural Ontario.

20-year
COMMITMENT

\$75 MILLION/yr

\$1 BILLION *savings*

Energy is one of the largest input costs on Ontario farms. Our farms and rural businesses need affordable energy to stay competitive, grow our economy and support local communities.

Natural gas supports economic and community expansion. We can build stronger, more vibrant rural communities when they have access to affordable energy. Expanded natural gas infrastructure would save Ontarians \$1 billion every year. That money can be reinvested in communities to grow our economy. And that's an investment that will reduce pressure on the electrical grid, reduce greenhouse gases and help alleviate growth stress on urban communities.

Visit ontarioruralgrowth.ca for more information about why an investment in natural gas access for rural Ontario is vital.

More than 300 Ontarians have taken action and sent a letter to their MPP asking for affordable energy across rural Ontario.

Solution to urban housing crunch lies outside the city

If you live in one of Ontario's main urban centres, you know the high cost of housing is a huge issue. OFA believes one of the solutions in the endless search for affordable housing lies outside the big city limits. That's why we are encouraging policymakers and city officials to take a serious look at a long-term solution that can be found in rural Ontario communities that surround the Greater Toronto and Hamilton Area (GTHA).

Toronto and the surrounding metropolis will never catch up with the infrastructure and housing needs if growth continues at the current rate. But what if we distribute economic development initiatives around the province by investing and building up our rural communities?

When the recent Barton Report highlighted agriculture and agri-food as important and viable growth areas, it might not have been thinking about housing, but OFA believes there is a natural fit. The provincial and federal finance ministers need to start talking to the agri-business sector – and mayors outside the GTHA – to work on ways to drive the economy and help alleviate the GTHA housing crisis.

Rural communities are eager to attract new businesses and residents. We need the infrastructure to support this growth including roads, bridges, drainage, broadband and natural gas, as well as schools and medical care.

With the right investments, rural Ontario could help relieve the urban housing strain for the long term.





Strengthen the social infrastructure

Strong communities depend on the strength of the infrastructure that helps bind them together. OFA is often talking about the infrastructure in rural Ontario that we need to drive our farm businesses — roads, bridges, drainage and broadband. But the social infrastructure of our communities is equally important. Medical care, schools and social services are vital parts of a strong community. Growing our agri-food sector depends on attracting businesses and families to live and work in our rural communities, and that depends on strong social infrastructure.

When you close a rural school, you close off the opportunities for the entire community.

OFA is very concerned about the alarming trend of rural school closures and the impact on our children, our families and our communities. Schools provide so much more than a place for learning — they are home to community social events, local sports, and service and community groups. Our rural communities suffer when youth and families leave to go after opportunities in urban areas. Rural schools are central to the health and wellbeing of our communities, and they are a vital social infrastructure that supports rural economic development.

OFA, together with the Ontario Alliance Against School Closures, are calling on the government for additional analysis of the social and economic impact of closing rural schools.

RESULTS OF THE RED TAPE CHALLENGE ON FOOD PROCESSING

When the Red Tape Challenge was announced in 2016, OFA encouraged all farm businesses to be part of the open and public review of regulations that impact the entire food value chain. We were encouraged that the Ontario government took a broader agri-food system perspective in their report on the food processing sector, released in April 2017. It would have been easy to narrow in only on the food processor red tape concerns, but the broader perspective in the final report also highlighted regulatory challenges that concern farmers.

Government regulations must make sense, and the rationale should be obvious. Consultation feedback included many “why” questions — Why the reporting is redundant? Why the inconsistency with other regulations? Why is the regulation not taking a risk-based approach?

OFA will be watching for regulatory changes that create an environment that attracts investment, innovation and jobs — with regulations that help and do not hinder opportunities for farm businesses.

The report from this food processing review identified 57 opportunities for government action to modernize regulations. OFA is committed to ensuring government follows through on these opportunities, and we believe the overall success of the Red Tape Challenge lies in these outcomes.

OFA encourages the government to fully consider these questions when developing its action plans that will come out of the Red Tape Challenge input.

We want meaningful regulatory and procedural changes to emerge that address the concerns and issues raised through the consultation process. It won't be enough to simply increase awareness about government-imposed regulations to seize the opportunities identified in the report.

Renewed commitment to reduce phosphorus levels in Great Lakes

Ontario's Great Lakes Basin includes 95% of Ontario's agricultural land. Farmers know the importance of keeping our environment healthy, including soil and waterways.

OFA has prepared comments on a new proposed action plan – developed by Canadian and Ontario governments – to reduce phosphorus levels in Lake Erie. The Domestic Action Plan is seeking input on proposed actions to meet Ontario's commitment under the Canada-U.S. Great Lakes Water Quality Agreement.



Lake Erie has been the main focus for phosphorus reduction in the Great Lakes. The draft plan recognizes the large number of contributing factors, and proposed guiding principles to address phosphorus reduction in Lake Erie and surrounding watersheds.

Ontario farmers already take action to reduce phosphorus entering the watershed and Great Lakes through the 4R Nutrient Stewardship principles. Working groups have been organized across the province to evaluate agronomic practices to reduce nutrient loss, like cover crops and timing of nutrient applications.

Agricultural groups are also working with Ontario Ministry of Agriculture, Food and Rural Affairs to develop an Agricultural Soil Health and Conservation Strategy to help reduce phosphorus loss into the Great Lakes.

OFA is committed to reducing phosphorus, and working together with farmers, farm organizations and collaborative groups like the Great Lakes and St. Lawrence Cities Initiative to continually improve farming practices and improve water quality.

OFA FIELD DAY

Mark Thursday, August 10 in your calendar for OFA's annual Field Day. This summer, we're headed to the Hamilton area to tour a vertically-integrated greenhouse cucumber operation.

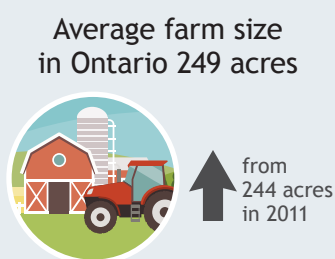
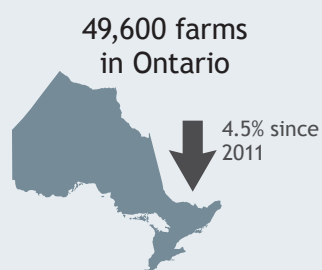
Watch your email for full details.

DID YOU KNOW

Ontario has more than 2,500 acres of vegetables grown in greenhouses – tomatoes, cucumbers and sweet peppers.

2016 Census of Agriculture – Ontario snapshot

Here are some highlights of Ontario's agriculture sector, from Statistics Canada's recent release of its 2016 Census of Agriculture data.



The number of younger farmers and women are growing

Do you have questions about Ontario's agri-food sector or want to learn more about issues impacting our industry? Contact OFA for insight and information.

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