Ontario Federation of Agriculture

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October 9, 2019

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RE: Ontario's Data Strategy Discussion Paper 2: Creating Economic Benefits

The Ontario Federation of Agriculture (OFA) is pleased to provide comments to the Ministry of Government and Consumer Services (MG&CS) on Discussion Paper 2: Creating Economic Benefits, part of Ontario's ongoing Data Strategy. The OFA is Canada's largest voluntary general farm organization, representing over 38,000 farm families across the province. These farm businesses form the backbone of a robust food system; helping to drive the Ontario economy forward.

In general, OFA is supportive of Data Strategy and we agree with the direction of this second Discussion Paper. We recognize the data landscape has become increasingly complex driving a strong need to take a more strategic approach to issues of data management, ownership, security, and use. We applaud MG&CS for leading the conversation on this important topic.

The agricultural sector is becoming digitized, and with an increasing use of more advanced monitoring systems and networked technologies, it is poised to produce an incredible amount of intricate and detailed data regarding production and practices. What is emerging is a very complex data environment with many questions remaining around the use, security, and ownership of this important data.

Farmers have always sought out and adopted new technologies in an effort to increase efficiency, reduce costs of production, and increase yields. Various new technologies have emerged within the last few years that have the potential to significantly transform agricultural production systems. On their own, these technologies provide better information, enabling farmers to make production decisions and more accurately control inputs and activities at a moment in time and space. When integrated into a network that can share collected data across platforms, these technologies provide an opportunity for producers to benchmark activities, vastly increase the efficiency of inputs, and monitor farm activities over time and space, generating a high degree of precision in agricultural production. This 'Precision Agriculture' provides increased economic viability through reducing costs of production by facilitating better decision-making, while improving environmental sustainability by lessening agricultural impacts on the land and reducing waste.

The future of agri-food in Ontario and Canada will be defined by our ability to effectively exploit the enormous volumes of data our industry is generating on a daily basis. Without a clear

understanding of how this data will be managed, where ownership lies, how consent for access will be granted and what privacy structures are required we run the risk of falling behind the global market.

Demand for Stronger Data Governance

OFA takes our farmers need for data privacy and security seriously. We know there remains significant uncertainty, mistrust, and confusion among farmers when it comes to the use of their farm data by a third party. In 2016, OFA launched a project aimed at investigating the Ag-Data Transparency Evaluator (ADTE), an initiative launched by the American Farm Bureau, and its potential application to the Canadian context. The ADTE is a process through which agricultural technology providers submit their service contracts for review by an independent, third-party administrator to evaluate the level of transparency around issues of farmers' data ownership, collection and retention, access, control and termination. Once reviewed and approved, the agricultural technology providers may use the "Ag Data Transparent" seal on their marketing and communications materials. The overall goal of this project was to contribute to reducing risk and facilitating the increased adoption of digital agricultural technologies.

We would welcome assistance through the Provincial Data Strategy to continue developing standards and codes of practice for agricultural data usage, in particular with regards to end user agreements between farmers and agricultural technology providers.

Fierce Competition for Data Talent

Ontario agriculture faces a significant and growing labour shortage. According to the most research from the Canadian Agricultural Human Resources Council (CAHRC), Ontario's agriculture sector was unable to fill 8,600 jobs in 2014, even with help from the foreign labour force, a shortfall that cost the sector $436 million. CAHRC projects that by 2025, the province will have 46,600 more jobs than the domestic labour force can fill.

A recent report from researchers and economist from the Royal Bank of Canada – *Farm 4.0: how the coming skills revolution can transform agricultural* – confirms the Canadian agricultural sector must rapidly embrace data-rich digital technologies to counteract the negative impacts of this looming labour shortage.

However, we have heard from our agricultural technology providers that they too have a significant number of unfilled positions resulting in lost revenue and innovation opportunities.
Part of a strategic approach must include working with the Ministry of Education (MOE) and Ministry of Training, Colleges and Universities (MTCU) to coordinate labour market research and planning with skills development.

Increasing Technology Adoption and Transfer

While the agricultural sector is in the midst of a digital revolution and data explosion, the use and valuation of farm-level data among our members remains relatively low.

The agricultural sector in Ontario is incredibly complex; involving a wide range of farm operations, sizes and commodity types, and a wide range of capacities of farmers to make substantial transformations to the way they farm. Given this wide range, there is no one-size-fits-all approach to increasing the incorporation of data-driven technologies into the farm business. Furthermore, nature of agricultural production and marketing often leaves our producers highly risk-averse and hesitant to adopt unproven technologies.

We agree with the discussion paper that we have been historically hampered by low commercialization rates for innovations and emerging technologies. However, Ontario is

fortunate to have a number of excellent agri-food research and innovation institutions in Guelph and the surrounding area. Ontario Agri-food Technologies (OAFT), a non-profit organization with a mission of enabling access to new technologies in the agri-food sector, provides incredible leadership in recognizing the potential of data and data-driven technologies to our sector. One of OAFT's projects, Canada Digital Agri-Food (CDAF), is driving a vision of digital transformation in the Canadian agri-food industry through the effective use of data as an essential resource.

Organizations like OAFT provide excellent value and leadership towards agricultural technology research, innovation, and commercialization. OFA recommends that the Ontario government provide the supports they need in order to accelerate the adoption of technologies that make our farmers more efficient, and more competitive.

Expanding Digital Infrastructure

OFA fully agrees that high-quality digital infrastructure is essential to enabling the growth of data and the digital economy. We know our farmers need reliable, fast and affordable broadband internet connectivity to share data, drive innovation, and facilitate the adoption of new agricultural technologies.

We see the rapid expansion of digital infrastructure in Ontario as a top priority for increasing technology adoption and adaptation, retaining and attracting talent with data competencies, mitigating the impacts of our critical labour shortage, and accelerating the digital transformation of our sector.

OFA appreciates the opportunity to comment on Discussion Paper 2: Creating Economic Benefits. We look forward to working with MG&CS as you continue to develop the Provincial Data Strategy. During the remainder of this consultation, we urge the Ministry to ensure that the voices and opinions of rural and remote people in Ontario are being heard; many of the persistent challenges identified in the Discussion Paper – technology adoption and transfer; attracting and retaining talent with data competencies; modern education and training; and robust broadband digital infrastructure – are exacerbated in rural areas and deserving of special attention.

Sincerely,

Keith Currie
President
Ontario Federation of Ontario