

May 13, 2020

Mr. Jack Van Gemeren
Ministry of Natural Resources and Forestry
Hearst District Office
613 Front Street
P.O. Box 670
Hearst, ON
P0L1N0

Dear Mr. Van Gemeren;

RE: Environmental Registry of Ontario Number 019-1468 Proposed agricultural land use amendment for Hearst and Kapuskasing

The Ontario Federation of Agriculture (OFA) is Canada's largest voluntary general farm organization, representing more than 38,000 farm family businesses across Ontario. These farm businesses form the backbone of a robust food system and rural communities with the potential to drive the Ontario economy forward.

OFA welcomes this opportunity to provide its perspective on the proposed agricultural land use amendment for Hearst and Kapuskasing. Opening agricultural lands in the Great Clay Belt to new farming operations is welcome news. It underscores the provincial government's commitment to and recognition of Ontario's agricultural sector to underpin economic growth for our province.

In 2018, Northern Ontario's agricultural and agri-food sector was a significant economic and employment driver for the region, with \$184.79 million in farm gate receipts and field to fork employment of over 11,000, while contributing \$625 million in gross domestic product to the province.

Section 2.3.3. of the Growth Plan for Northern Ontario speaks to growing and diversifying the Agriculture, Aquaculture and Food Processing sector;

1. Efforts by the Province, industry and, where appropriate, other partners, to grow and diversify the agriculture, aquaculture and food processing sector should include:
 - a. undertaking and disseminating research focused on northern climatic and environmental conditions;
 - b. identifying opportunities for developing the bioeconomy within this sector, including innovative uses of agriculture/food processing, biomass, and collaboration among producers, processors, the forest industry, biorefineries and the biopharmaceutical industry;
 - c. identifying land improvement and environmental sustainability needs;

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- d. expanding production in the North to contribute to a sustainable local food source for Northern Ontario residents;
 - e. exploring opportunities for complementary economic activities on agricultural land, as appropriate;
 - f. supporting buy-local initiatives that increase consumer awareness of Ontario-produced foods and encourage Ontarians to buy locally, including Northern Ontario products;
 - g. marketing and branding that showcases environmental stewardship, innovation and food safety;
 - h. supporting development of production, processing and distribution systems.

Growth of agriculture and food processing requires expansion of the land base for primary agricultural production, as noted in subsections d, e and h. Enabling farmers to buy or lease Crown Land for agriculture will facilitate this growth.

Over the years, farmers across Northern Ontario have highlighted the challenges of establishing farming operations in that portion of our province. Inconsistent area-specific policies that do not permit the disposition (i.e. sale or lease) of Crown land for agriculture or restrictions (i.e. dispositions for farm expansion only and not for new farms) within land use policies that permit the disposition of Crown land for agriculture have held back growth of the Northern Ontario agri-food sector. Local policies that discriminated against acquiring Crown Land for new farming operations or expansions of existing farm operations are short-sighted and must be rescinded.

The Ministry of Natural Resources and Forestry is proposing to allow the disposition of Crown Land for agriculture as a permitted use in the identified areas between Hearst and Kapuskasing.

OFA wholeheartedly supports the disposition of Crown Land for agriculture as a permitted use in the identified areas between Hearst and Kapuskasing. Opening lands in this area for agriculture will serve to underpin the local economy by providing a source of local food. Local food production reinforces employment in primary agriculture, supports local food processing and the services that farmers and food processing facilities depend on. One caveat would be that any disposition process supports farmers accessing the land, rather than investors or land speculators. Farmers are concerned that if investors acquire large tracts of land and then rent to farmers, they will not be able to continue growing their own land holdings. While investors/speculators have the capital necessary to access large plots of land, clear them and ready them for agricultural production, OFA advocates that the provincial government prioritize Crown Land sales to farmers.

OFA agrees that the Crown Land available for disposition for agriculture should be equally accessible to either farmers establishing new agricultural operations in the Hearst to Kapuskasing area, or to existing farmers in that area requiring additional land to expand their agricultural operations. Accessibility to affordable land for agriculture in the areas between Hearst and Kapuskasing must be made available equally to new farmers and to existing farmers.

Farmers wishing to acquire land for farming in the Hearst to Kapuskasing area should have easy access to up-to-date soils maps for this region. In addition, the Ministry of Agriculture, Food and Rural Affairs should continue to offer a range of agricultural extension services to farmers, combined with provincial government support for businesses that provide farm inputs, direct to farm services (i.e. large animal veterinarians, crop advisors), or transport or process the agricultural products produced on farms in this region.

Businesses wishing to provide direct-to-farm services, farm inputs, transportation or processing the farm products grown or raised in this region will need access to natural gas, reliable high-speed internet and affordable electric power. In addition, the province should plan to service agricultural land and farms in the Hearst to Kapuskasing area with natural gas, reliable high-speed internet and affordable electric power.

OFA welcomes this opportunity to provide its perspectives on the proposed agricultural land use amendment for Hearst and Kapuskasing.

Sincerely,



Keith Currie
President

KC/pj

cc: The Honourable John Yakabuski, Minister of Natural Resources and Forestry
The Honourable Ernie Hardeman, Minister of Agriculture, Food and Rural Affairs
OFA Board of Directors