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2021 EDITION

Our Road To Recovery



ANNUAL UPDATE FROM THE
ONTARIO FEDERATION OF AGRICULTURE

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OFA Today is published for the Ontario Federation of Agriculture (OFA), the largest general farm organization in Ontario, representing 38,000 farms, farm businesses and farm family members and supporters. As a dynamic, farmer-led organization based in Guelph, OFA works to represent and champion the diverse interests of Ontario farmers through government relations, farm policy recommendations, lobby efforts, research, community representation, media relations and more. OFA is the leading advocate for Ontario farmers, their farm businesses and their communities.

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EDITOR'S NOTE

The Ontario Federation of Agriculture (OFA) is excited to bring you our 2021 edition of *OFA Today* magazine. Our annual publication offers the perfect opportunity to reflect on the many challenges and obstacles we've overcome this past year as well as celebrate our successes and achievements. It's also a chance to highlight our resilience and perseverance as an industry and how, together, the agri-food sector has remained strong through a year of uncertainty and unpredictability.

We continue to provide updates on key issues and priorities impacting the profitability and sustainability of our 38,000 farm families, but this year's edition was created with a different perspective. The intent was to showcase some of the good news stories as a result of the pandemic and put a spotlight on the great work of our farmers, industry partners and key stakeholders. We are very proud of all of the work our organization and its members have accomplished this year and we are thrilled to be able to highlight some of those achievements in this year's magazine.

Inside this publication, you'll read about the many successes and challenges our industry has faced amidst a busy year caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. We will showcase how Ontario farmers were able to adapt to a global pandemic and champion the industry to keep our food value chain strong and reliable. We celebrate organizational wins in terms of programs, legislation and initiatives, and we share stories of positivity and generosity about farmers, organizations and community members working together to give back to those in need. We also feature OFA projects, activities related to member input, government relations and industry collaboration.

We bid farewell to an outgoing board member after 20 plus years with the organization as well as a fellow staff member who retired from OFA in December after 33 years of service and dedication. We also welcome aboard a new director who will bring a fresh perspective to the OFA table.

We've seen a change in leadership at the top of the organization with new President Peggy Brekveld, as she shares a welcome message to all members. We give a nod and much deserved recognition to Past President Keith Currie as he reflects on four years of leadership with the organization.

We hope you enjoy reading this year's edition and the stories featured about the tremendous work our industry accomplished this year. We are hopeful for a better year ahead and look forward to navigating our road to recovery together.

Sincerely,



Tyler Brooks,
Editor



Tyler Brooks, Director of
Communications and
Stakeholder Relations

PRESIDENT'S WELCOME



Peggy Brekveld, OFA President

Welcome to the 2021 edition of *OFA Today*. I am honoured to serve as your OFA President for the 2020–2021 year. This past year at OFA has been filled with many challenges and unforeseeable events. Nevertheless, farmers have persevered. I am proud of our agriculture community – we have found ways to look out for one another. It included tractor parades supporting frontline workers, food bank donations, and more. This is the essence of our hashtag #OntAgProud.

As the new year begins, we will continue to push through the global pandemic and show our resilience as strong Ontario farmers. Through the work of your elected Board of Directors and staff, OFA will continue to advocate on behalf of our 38,000 farm families. Many people talk about one voice in agriculture, but at OFA, we believe that it's about many voices, and one message. As issues arise, we hope that you will join us in bringing the concerns, challenges and solutions agriculture has to decision-makers at all levels of government.

OFA's mission statement, *Farms and Food Forever*, embodies how our Ontario farmers have historically prospered

and adapted to change and how we continue to produce fresh, nutritious food for families across the province and beyond. As we proceed in navigating our way through what may be another year of unprecedented events, OFA will work to ensure that our farmers have the tools, resources and support they need to run their farm businesses effectively in 2021 and beyond.

As I write this, there are issues beyond the pandemic that face us. OFA will continue to advocate for the protection of farmland and food safety through proclamations of Bill 156, ensuring that our farm families, agri-food employees, animals and the food system remain protected through the right of lawful protest. We are also working towards adequate and attainable clean fuel standards for Ontario farmers. OFA continues to push for Ontario farmers to be recognized as environmental stewards and is working to partner with the federal government to create a set of attainable regulations for farmers to abide by. Minister's Zoning Orders (MZO) is another challenge that OFA continues to address with the provincial government to ensure that the use of MZOs is deterred for municipalities with well-developed, Ministry-approved Official Plans and Zoning By-laws.

And we continue to push for better broadband internet, better infrastructure across rural Ontario, and how we can best build public trust in agriculture. Not all victories happen that quickly. When I think of OFA's success, I see how each effort builds on the small things that we have achieved over time. You are a part of our success.

Consider raising a glass – of creamy white milk, sweet apple cider, whisky or craft beer – (whatever tickles your fancy!) as we continue to navigate our way to *Farms and Food Forever!*

Cheers,

Peggy Brekveld,
OFA President

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GETTING RESULTS WITH GOVERNMENT, ELECTED OFFICIALS

We recognize the support our farming and rural communities have received from MPPs and MPs across the province through their willingness to meet virtually and engage in valuable discussions on key issues and priorities affecting the agriculture industry.

OFA looks forward to continuing to work together with provincial and federal policymakers to unlock opportunities for growth as we navigate our road to economic recovery. Together, we can ensure Ontarians have access to a safe, strong and reliable food value chain across the province.

Here are some of the activities OFA undertook during the past year to ensure our priorities were front and centre and that government moved forward on a number of them. We are also highlighting the tremendous efforts of some of our county federations in bringing member priorities to the attention of local elected officials.

Engaging young farmers in advocacy and meetings with government policymakers has been a significant focus of the organization as we take steps to prepare the next generation of agricultural leaders. We want to highlight how we are working with them to enhance their knowledge and experience. OFA engaged a new crop of leaders to join the organization at a variety of events in 2019-2020, including our Queen's Park lobby day, the Canadian Federation of Agriculture (CFA) annual meeting and the Conservative and NDP provincial caucus breakfast meetings. This remains a key priority for the organization moving forward.

Queen's Park lobby day a big hit with young farmers

While it's hard to remember anything pre-pandemic, five young farmers had clear recollections of what they took away from participating in OFA's Queen's Park lobby day on December 9, 2019.

It was one of several activities the OFA is undertaking as part of its succession planning – to maintain a strong and vibrant agricultural organization well into the future.

Here's some of what they had to say:

Patrick Verkley, who grew up on a farm, has a broiler operation that he started less than two years ago west of Strathroy in Middlesex County. The 29-year-old raises 16,000



Young leaders representing OFA (left to right) Erica (Renaud) Miles and Charlotte Huitema attend a meeting with MPP Mike Schreiner, Leader of the Green Party of Ontario and directors Keith Currie and Larry Davis.

birds for Riverview Poultry and has a unique perspective on farming due to his five-year degree in architecture from the University of Waterloo. To earn his degree, he worked in various Canadian cities during his co-op terms and studied in Rome for a four-month stint.

"I have experience working with, and have great friendships with people from the city so I've been forced, somewhat, to think about agriculture from the perspective of non-farmers," he says. With his background, Patrick hopes to help bridge the gap between rural and urban people (like politicians).

He also really enjoyed lobby day.

"I appreciated the chance to see what OFA does at Queen's Park, to see how they interacted with the politicians – it was a real window into the board of directors," he says, adding that he appreciated the smaller groups so he could get to know the members.

He was also impressed by those who are already on the board, and liked learning how they prepare for meetings and how they communicate the goals of the OFA.

As to the future, he says he'd like to become a member of the OFA board at some point but for now, he's sustainably building his business and working in the window-filled chick barn that he designed. He's also advocating for more space for busy younger people to get their voices heard in agricultural organizations.

Erica (Renaud) Miles rents a 95-acre property near Fenwick in the Niagara region. Her husband is a hydro worker in St. Catharines.

The 27-year-old's farm business is actually at her mother's 1,500 acre cow-calf and crop farm in Leeds County in eastern Ontario. She would spend a month during planting in the east, come home to Niagara, then go back for haying and harvest. She and her husband are working to build their own herd and farm business.

Erica is inspired by her mother Eleanor, who is a long-time member of the local federation board.

"Getting invited to go to lobby day for me was so exciting," she says. "This was how things get done – talking to people who will make decisions that affect farmers' lives."

She took the opportunity very seriously, furiously taking notes and soaking in the information and the tactics that



Patrick Verkley (far right), part of the next generation of agriculture leaders, is joined by OFA directors (left to right) Drew Spoelstra, Teresa Van Raay and Crispin Colvin for a meeting with MPP Sam Oosterhoff, Parliamentary Assistant to the Minister of Education (middle).



OFA brought the next generation of farm leaders to meet elected officials at lobby days and caucus breakfast meetings.

the directors were using.

“Politicians are just people – the conversations weren’t intimidating in any way,” she says. “That was really good.”

While she’s optimistic about how agriculture is advancing, she’s a bit disheartened by how difficult it is for young people to get into the business.

“If we want more young people to get involved, we have to change the attitudes about go big or go home,” she says, adding that she’d like to see smaller farms being able to thrive, and is encouraged by the public’s renewed interest in farming and food self-sufficiency during the pandemic.

Ryan Devries owns and operates a 40-cow dairy farm locat-

ed south of Ottawa and helps his dad with his cash crops.

The 29-year-old said lobby day was a good experience, especially being able to see the inner workings of the OFA.

“We hear about what they do, but it was really interesting to actually see them in action,” he says, adding that he was impressed by the fact that the OFA is respected and well-received by MPPs and their staffers.

He remarked on the amount of work that goes into being an OFA director, and said that, for now, being Vice President of the local Dundas County Federation, along with his own farm, keeps him busy enough. He says he’s seen a lot of younger people getting involved in local committees, so is encouraged by that trend.

OFA AND COUNTY FEDERATIONS TRANSITION TO VIRTUAL

When COVID-19 hit the OFA went virtual – bringing messages and priorities to the government via online platforms. Virtual meetings eliminated the logistics of travel, accommodation and food and allowed government officials to easily attend meetings.

County federations got on board with online as well. Here’s a sampling from across the province of the great work that was done:

- **Grey County Federation** hosted a virtual town hall meeting for government officials and farm members to address current issues in the agricultural community, how they could be addressed and finding next steps. Local farmers, municipal representatives, MPP Bill Walker and MP Alex Ruff participated in the virtual meeting.
- **Elgin County Federation** hosted a virtual roundtable to discuss issues affecting their community that included Elgin County commodity representatives, county council, MP Karen Vecchio and MPP Jeff Yurek.
- **Dundas, Stormont and Glengarry** met with federal and provincial policymakers to discuss and address several key issues and priorities that were affecting their local agricultural and rural communities.
- **Leeds County Federation** directors met virtually with MPP Steve Clark, MP Michael Barrett and special guest Hon. Ernie Hardeman, Minister of Agriculture, Food and Rural Affairs. Minister Hardeman reiterated the various programs and other accomplishments the provincial government has provided throughout the COVID-19 pandemic. **OFA**



OFA directors Peggy Brekvelde (left) and Teresa Van Raay (right) are joined by young farmer Sara Wood (far right) for a meeting with a representative from the office of the Associate Minister of Mental Health and Addictions.

“I think there’s potential for growth,” he says.

“I think opportunities like the Queen’s Park lobby day is great to get us younger generation involved and open to what’s being done,” he says. “More events like this will spark more interest.”

Sara Wood is a new chicken farmer, and helps to manage a cash crop farm of wheat, soybeans and corn in Perth County, near Mitchell.

The 32-year-old’s mother is the farm’s managing partner, while Sara and her husband Chris run the day-to-day operations.

“I think you can learn just as much off the farm as on the farm, and I love networking and learning,” she says, noting that she completed a Bachelor of Arts with a focus on criminal justice at the University of Guelph.

She’s also an Advanced Agricultural Leadership Program graduate, class 15, and was Ontario Queen of the Furrow in 2012-13, which was also when she returned to the farm. In late 2020, she was Vice President of her local federation.

Wood says she was surprised at how short the meetings were during lobby day. It meant that directors had to focus on one or two topics and be very precise in what they were saying.

She really liked the fact that she got to know different directors and their approaches to taking meetings – and absorbed lots of tips and tricks along the way.

“It’s amazing how many meetings you can fit into one day,” she says.

She says Perth County is very forward-looking, with a young board made up of about half women and half men. She adds that the future also looks bright, judging by the number of scholarship applications and the depth of community service shown by those who apply.

“Those young people are open to new ideas and opportunities, and it’s so encouraging to watch,” she says, pointing out that there’s lots to learn from the older folks, too.

Charlotte Huitema is a third-generation egg farmer who lives near Dunnville in Haldimand County. Her family has

OFA ACCOMPLISHMENTS

OFA is proud of the many advances we’ve been able to obtain in our priority areas over the past year with the support of our members.

Provincial Animal Welfare Services (PAWS) Act

This legislation, which came into effect January 1, 2020, implemented a provincially-funded animal welfare enforcement model, designed to protect animals from abuse and neglect, and create uniformity across the province.

Bill 156, Security from Trespass and Protecting Food Safety Act, 2020

The *Security from Trespass and Protecting Food Safety Act, 2020* ensures Ontario’s food value chain system is safeguarded, by strengthening protections for farm families, agri-food employees, and animals while maintaining the right to peaceful protest. The Act, which came into effect on December 5, 2020, demonstrates to trespassers, activists, law enforcement and the Ontario justice system that the protection of farms, families, agri-food employees, animals and the food system is of the highest priority.

Investments in rural infrastructure – natural gas, broadband internet and roads and bridges

The province invested up to \$130 million to support new

natural gas expansion projects over a three-year period (2021-2023) for rural and northern communities. In the November 2020 provincial budget, the Ontario government announced an investment of nearly \$1 billion in expanding and improving rural broadband and cellular access. From April 2020 – March 2021, the provincial government is committing \$2.6 billion to repair and expand provincial highways and bridges.

Influence on Climate Change Panel

OFA’s Past President Keith Currie was appointed to the Ontario Advisory Panel on Climate Change in November 2019 and is one of 10 members of the group. Keith’s role on the panel will ensure agriculture is part of every conversation and decision, and most importantly, acknowledged for our ongoing role in managing climate change.

Conservation Authority consultations

OFA and members contributed to consultations around clarifying the role of conservation authorities. We called for a greater recognition of farmers’ roles, more funding as well as greater consistency in the interpretation of rules, and the delivery of programs and services CAs provide across the province. OFA strongly supports plans for an agricultural representative to have a voice and seat at the board table of the conservation authorities.

12,000 hens and, three years ago, they built a new enriched-housing barn.

The 26-year-old went to Mohawk College for the Recreation and Leisure diploma and also obtained an Agricultural Diploma from Ridgeway in 2018.

“I’m glad I went away for a while – it made me realize what I had in my own backyard,” she says.

Huitema is very active in agriculture. She has been an egg ambassador at the CNE, the Royal Winter Fair and taught elementary school children about laying hens at the AG-stravaganza during the Caledonia fair.

She was also a member of OFA’s Policy Advisory Council representing Junior Farmers during the pandemic, and helped coordinate egg deliveries to the local food bank.

On lobby day, she says she learned that OFA directors have very good relationships with the members of government.

“It helped us get the message across for the priorities we wanted to achieve for 2020 – like natural gas, rural internet and the rural schools,” she says adding she attended three meetings – with MPP of Haldimand-Norfolk Toby Barrett, Minister of Agriculture, Food and Rural Affairs Ernie Hardeman and Green Party leader Mike Schreiner.

Huitema has been an advocate since she was very little – and brought to Queen’s Park a newspaper clipping showing her in front of the legislature with a sign saying “All I want for Christmas...” at the pig protest of 1998. At the time, her family were pork producers.



OFA hosted young farmers at the CFA Annual General Meeting in February to meet with industry stakeholders and government policymakers.

Hardeman remembered the event and sought her out at the reception on lobby day to tell her so.

Huitema’s father has long been involved with both the Egg Farmers of Ontario and the Haldimand Federation board and she is now a local director.

“I’m thankful for the opportunities egg farming has offered myself and my family,” she says, adding she intends to continue to help grow her family’s business and promoting egg farming in the future. **OFA**

Increased funding for Ontario’s Risk Management Program

A \$50 million shot in the arm from the provincial government for the Risk Management Program was welcome news for OFA and its members, who were dealing with the tumultuous times of the pandemic. There was a 75% advance on the funding.

Changes to Proposed ONCA

OFA breathed a sigh of relief and thanked the provincial government for ensuring the organization could avoid disruption to its democratically elected structure when the *Ontario Not-for-Profit Corporations Act* (ONCA) is brought into force.

Freedom-of-information (FOI) request

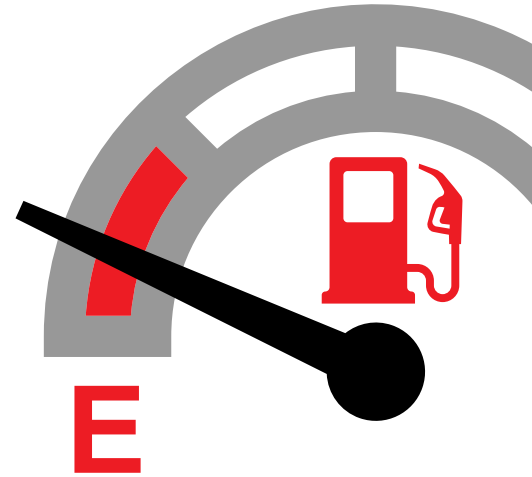
On November 12, 2020, a settlement was reached, and the FOI request was dropped. The request was initiated in June and after a lengthy period of mediation, led by OFA and supported by our legal counsel, the request for a list of names of all Farm Business Registrants was withdrawn. Together, with the Christian Farmers Federation of Agriculture (CFFO) and the National Farmers Union – Ontario (NFU-O), our farm organizations strongly opposed the release of this information and worked diligently to protect the privacy and security our farm operations.

Pandemic funding

OFA was involved in helping develop and enhance a number of government-funded programs due to the effects of COVID-19.

Here are the highlights:

- Federal and provincial funding for personal protective equipment to keep agri-food employees safe and to help businesses adapt to pandemic health and safety protocols.
- Federal initiatives to ensure the essential seasonal labour force had border access as well as funding to offset additional producer costs to maintain health and safety on the farm.
- Changes to the Canadian Emergency Business Account (CEBA) program allowing farmers who use personal bank accounts to apply.
- Funding to help small businesses, including farms, move to online platforms.
- Crop insurance to cover labour losses.
- Funding for career and training opportunities.
- Canadian Agricultural Partnership funding to launch OFA’s Feeding Your Future initiative to help address labour gaps in the agri-food sector. **OFA**



Growing farmer wellness

Without the traditional season of gatherings and meetings with friends, family and the farming community, we're encouraging everyone to be aware of the care and wellness necessary to thrive, not just survive, through the winter months.

Recently, OFA has signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) with the Canadian Mental Health Association (CMHA), Ontario Division to address key mental health issues affecting Ontario farmers, agriculture employees and farm families. This is a tremendous opportunity to offer half-day, evidence-based mental health literacy programming, and create awareness and support specific for farmer mental health through 'In the Know' sessions. These sessions, developed at the University of Guelph, are expected to be launched in early 2021. Course materials and resource development are being supported through a generous financial contribution by Listowel's Trillium Mutual Insurance.

The harsh reality is that sometimes the struggle for balance and mental wellness on the farm is closer to home than we realize. It brings priorities into sharp perspective when we learn, sometimes too late, that someone in our circle is in a really dark place.

Think of mental health and wellness as a dashboard using these helpful tips:

- ✓ **Check your own levels** – are you close to 'empty' on energy, patience, sleep, hydration... or cruising close to burnout?
- ✓ **Find ways to recharge** – hobbies, staycations, breaks from everyday farm tasks, enjoy a favourite show, write down something you are grateful for.
- ✓ **Do a circle check of your network** – check in on neighbours, friends and family. When you ask how they are doing, really listen.
- ✓ **Don't hesitate, reach out for help** – Look for help from a specialist if the situation is overwhelming, or start by talking to a trusted friend. We are in this together.

We advocate for economic growth and prosperity for Ontario farm businesses, but at our core we care about the health and wellness of our 38,000 farm family members, as individuals. As farmers, we often pride ourselves on our work ethic, strength and entrepreneurial spirit. But in order to maintain the resilience required to thrive, mental well-being must be part of the equation. It begins with starting a conversation and watching out for each other.

Together, our sector is looking out for the most important resource in Ontario agriculture... our people.

For information, resources and help lines, visit ofa.on.ca/issues/mental-health. Contact Ontario's toll-free mental health and addictions help line at **1.866.531.2600**.



**Canadian Mental
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OFA LISTENS TO AND SERVES FARMERS THROUGH PANDEMIC

The COVID-19 pandemic caused a great deal of disruption across the province, the country and around the world, but OFA was quick to recognize the need, identify ways to help, and deliver supportive resources and services to members.

Member surveys highlight issues and resilience

In order to find out how members were faring, and to create targeted materials to help them, four surveys were developed and deployed.

In the first, which established a baseline in March, nearly three-quarters of members were expecting a change in their operation and even more were anticipating a drop in revenue due to value chain disruptions.

Anxiety was high with more than 70% worried about their inability to conduct business as usual and almost that many expecting a reduced cash flow. The top three concerns were finances, a decrease in consumer spending and a potential global recession. Many were concerned about cash flow, and about a third of respondents expected they'd need to pause or reschedule loan repayments. Delays and disruptions in obtaining seasonal agricultural workers were top of mind, especially in the horticultural sector. Maintaining access to input supplies concerned many.

The poor quality and high cost of rural internet and telecommunications services were identified as exponentially compounding problems.

The second survey in April saw nearly double the number of participants at more than 700. Finances were still top of mind with 95% anticipating a negative impact on farm businesses. Nearly two thirds of respondents were already experiencing lost revenue and one in four believed it would take more than three months to return to business as usual if the pandemic ended immediately.

Most members felt that a direct government payment would be most effective, although there were suggestions to enhance the Business Risk Management program and

make changes to production insurance programs.

In the third survey in May, 620 members responded, and 88% of them said their farm businesses had suffered negative financial impacts. Sixty-one per cent had experienced lost revenue, while more than half faced reduced cash flow and weren't able to conduct business as usual.

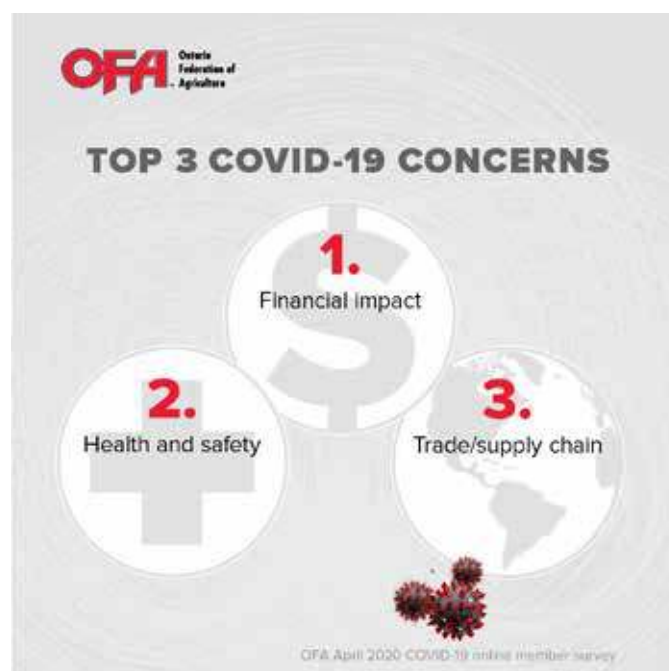
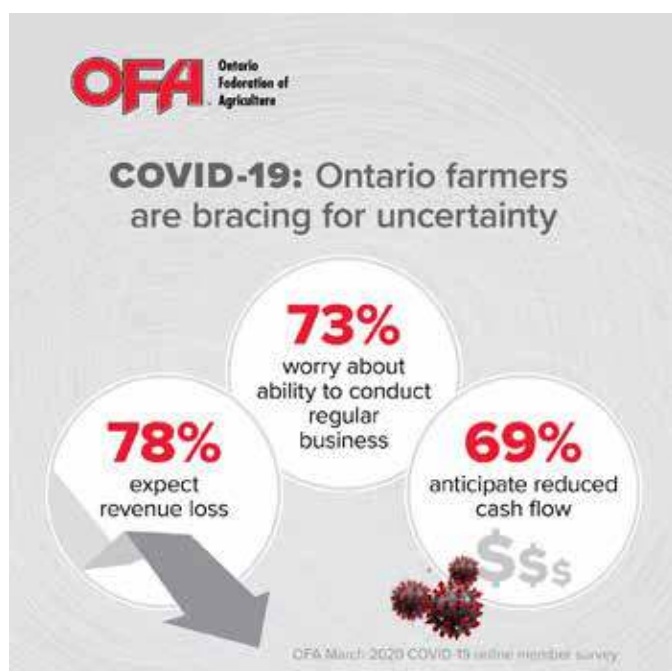
At 62%, there was a significant jump in the number of members who said it would take more than three months to get back to business as usual compared to 41% in April and 22% in March.

Added to the third survey were questions about members' mental health, and two-thirds said they were experiencing more stress and concern due to COVID-19. A third said they'd reached out to family and friends, about the same number said they'd taken short breaks and seven per cent said they'd sought out professional help.

There were concerns about getting livestock to processing facilities and getting finished products and grain shipped.

Two-thirds of respondents said they used websites to find information, more than half used media channels and a third connected with staff and specialists to get the latest updates.

A fourth survey conducted in October that again garnered nearly 700 responses revealed much more positive results. They indicated that many farmers have slowly transitioned out of the unpredictable phase of COVID-19 and have started adapting to new strategies to maintain, or even grow, their business. Greater public interest in local food has resulted in an uptick, in some cases, in local food sales and online opportunities. One-third of respondents



reported new customers, more sales and, sometimes, reduced expenses.

Still, the bigger economic picture had farmers worried. The survey revealed that 60% of Ontario farmers were concerned about a global recession, while 55% were still troubled about financial impacts to their farm businesses and 52% were apprehensive about trade and supply chain issues.

In addition, labour shortages continued to be a major concern and 43% said they had to alter their business to cope due to disruptions that meant delays in getting equipment parts and materials.

Online member services and communications

OFA recognized that COVID-19 brought on pressures and challenges we had never before experienced and that members needed to be supported as they adapted to unprecedented conditions. That's why OFA used the surveys, industry partners and engaging with grassroots members to develop and deploy useful information and support services.

The resource hub on our website is helping members and the entire agriculture and food community stay connected with the latest news and updates on the pandemic. It is the go-to online centre for information on key issues, announcements, programs and support.

Besides the Guide to Operating your Farm Business during COVID-19, which is about reducing risk, maintaining safety and what to do if there's an outbreak on the farm, there's a list of government financial support programs, a webinar on how to deal with the Temporary Foreign Worker program and a template letter to authorize travel for essential workers. There's also a guide that provides tips on direct sales to consumers, guidance for tapping into the local labour force and help in finding mental health and wellness support.

In addition, OFA's communications team kicked into high

gear, issuing news releases at regular intervals during the course of the pandemic. They reassured the public that Ontario farmers were committed to maintaining the food supply, called on the government to ensure seasonal agricultural workers could get into the country and pointed out how the agri-food sector prioritizes the health and safety of all workers, among other important topics.

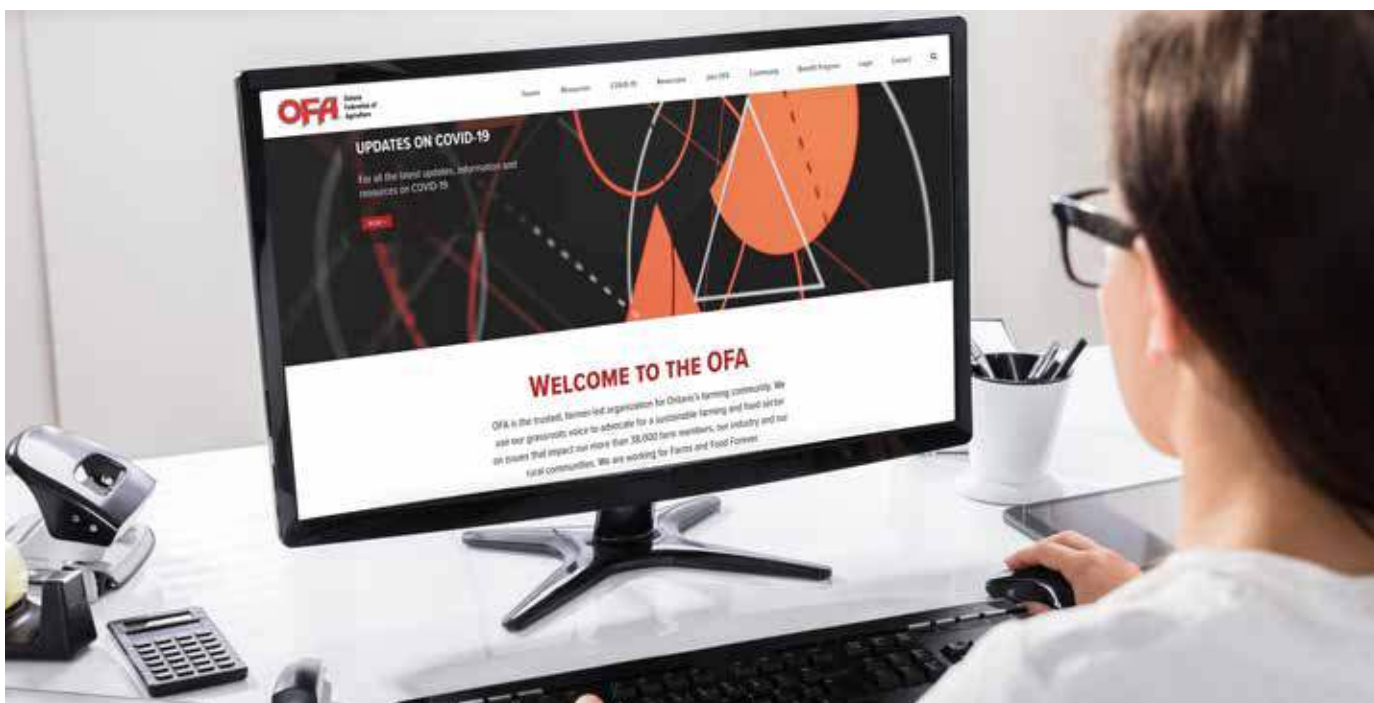
Ad campaigns ran to ensure farmers were aware of OFA's supportive offerings and to show that the agri-food sector continued to keep healthy, safe and affordable food on the tables of all Ontarians through the tough times of the pandemic.

Communication pieces produced by the organization highlighted both the resilience of the agri-food industry to keep the food value chain moving and the serious challenges facing all sectors. The emphasis, as always, was on resolving daunting problems by collaborating with industry stakeholders and government policymakers to come up with workable solutions.

On the ground services

Field staff worked the phones, emails and online meetings to respond to member questions and concerns. They pivoted by transitioning county and regional meetings for in-person to online formats, which they both organized and hosted. They engaged in virtual town halls with MPs, MPPs and municipal officials. Staff also pitched in with donation collections and other charitable work alongside their county federation partners.

Provincial directors were kept busy, too, attending virtual town hall meetings, responding to media requests and helping members with questions and issues in their elected zones. By receiving member concerns and presenting OFA information and updates at county and regional meetings, directors played a crucial link in the organization's network. **OFA**



ONTARIO FARMERS GIVE BACK DURING COVID-19

The resilience and community-mindedness of farmers was in high gear over the past year – and went into overdrive during the pandemic.

In spite of their own challenges, members in county federations across the province showed their caring, sharing and goodwill toward others through the tough times of COVID-19.

During normal times, farmers regularly display their resilience and innovative streak in getting around, over, or through tough situations. During the pandemic, they came through with flying colours in order to provide support for, and contribute to, their local areas.

They put on tractor parades to show their appreciation for hospitals and health care workers. They were generous in their donations of money and food for food banks, shelters and retirement homes. Many pitched in to help produce or buy personal protective equipment.

Social media was filled with videos of local federation members rolling up their sleeves, putting on masks and slathering on the sanitizer to help out with local food drives and to feed our frontline heroes.

Farmers got creative in making sure the value chain held, so the people of Ontario would continue to have food on the table. They came up with innovative add-ons to equipment, pivoted to online direct sales and found new ways to

keep the farm business running in the face of lockdowns and disruptions at both the supply and sales ends of the value chain.

All the while, OFA field staff and directors were there – providing supportive services and linking people who needed help with those who could provide it.

There was an explosion in collaborative efforts among farmers, agribusiness, commodity groups and community organizations to develop strategies and actions to support one another, their neighbours and the industry. The pandemic also generated a renewed appreciation for the people who work in transportation, processing and retail to maintain the availability of vital food products.

OFA's #OntAgProud campaign was a collection of positive stories that shone a light on the tenacity of the folks involved in the agri-food sector and how they pulled together to make our people, businesses and communities stronger. It recognizes the significant work being done and the deep connection farmers have in their local areas.

In a year that brought historic amounts of pain and suffering to thousands of people and hundreds of Ontario communities, our farmers showed their strength of character, generosity and creativity. The whole province benefited as a result. **OFA**



Farmers have banded together to show their generosity, spread positivity and offer support to their local communities across Ontario.

AGRI-FOOD INVESTMENTS ARE THE SOLUTION TO ONTARIO'S ECONOMIC RECOVERY



The agri-food sector has the potential to drive Ontario's economic growth and recovery post-COVID-19.

Any major crisis brings about new opportunities to rethink how our systems work and make them more resilient to future challenges. The agri-food sector should be seen as a place of opportunity for regional economic development and growth – during the pandemic, and on the road to economic recovery.

Communities across Ontario have developed regional economic recovery task forces and resiliency committees to identify ways to strengthen their economies and rebound. OFA members have joined local committees and task forces to help identify opportunities such as economic development and growth in rural areas, and how to reduce regulatory burdens to help agriculture and food businesses grow in these challenging times.

OFA is positioning the agri-food sector as a viable solution for the Ontario government to work with us on investments in the industry and rural communities. Sound investments in rural Ontario will encourage new farm ventures, expansions and rural growth, and in turn, stimulate the provincial economy. OFA's fall 2020 pre-budget submission identified a number of ways to drive agri-food:

- Work with municipalities across rural Ontario to develop a cost-effective infrastructure program and provide core funding to implement the program
- Facilitate functional access to high-speed internet across rural and remote communities
- Improve natural gas access and fund the development

and adoption of new technology to use surplus biomass from Ontario farms as an alternative energy source

- Accommodate the unique needs of rural schools and medical services and facilities to ensure that they remain open to serve the families of rural and small-town Ontario
- Work with Ontario's livestock sector to address the processing capacity issue to ensure the financial sustainability of our livestock farms

While the COVID-19 pandemic has further exacerbated ongoing rural and agricultural issues, it has also highlighted new opportunities for direct farm marketing, online sales, collaborative promotional campaigns and unique tourism opportunities. OFA members have taken advantage of these silver linings and adapted to help grow our economy. Consumers have shifted their buying habits to favour local products and tourism in rural areas. OFA is proud of our farm families who have pivoted to new sales channels during these challenging times, and we know that they will take these solutions into the future to continue to grow the agri-food sector and drive our economy.

Investing in Ontario's agri-food sector will create jobs, improve food security, and help our economy not only rebound and recover, but grow and prosper. As we begin to navigate our road to recovery, OFA believes Ontario's agri-food industry will have a vital role in rebuilding our economy. **OFA**

OFA LAUNCHES FEEDING YOUR FUTURE INITIATIVE TO TACKLE AGRICULTURE LABOUR AND TRAINING NEEDS

In May 2020, OFA launched a new project as a direct response to the agri-food labour challenges amplified by the COVID-19 pandemic. The Feeding Your Future initiative connects Ontario employers and job seekers in the agri-food sector through job postings, virtual career fairs, webinars and short-term training opportunities. These services were made possible through 14 collaborative partners and strong support from AgCareers.com and CareersInFood.com.

Many farms faced increased strain this year due to a lack of available employees and the sudden regulations implemented in all workplaces. This experience highlighted an existing vulnerability that focused on training and retaining employees in the sector to create long-term stability. One strategy was to encourage youth with limited exposure to agriculture to consider career opportunities within the sector. From farm to table, there are many roles that must be filled to support the growth and resiliency of the agriculture industry.

The project has successfully reached Ontarians across the province with the many virtual services available. Over 1,500 job seekers and 200 employers participated in the 11 virtual career fairs hosted from May to November 2020, providing over 800 job openings. Hundreds of attendees participated in 10 webinars on various training topics of interest to both job seekers and employers. Key themes included: creating a welcoming workplace culture, how to effectively train and retain new employees, and how to stand out as a job applicant. All webinar recordings can be found on the Feeding Your Future website.

The goal for the project in 2021 is to use the existing momentum to reach more OFA members and prepare for the spring planting season. On March 11, 2021, a virtual career fair will be held to assist with on-farm hiring to mitigate the stress of an already busy season. Additionally, an exciting new Ontario Agriculture Worker Safety and Awareness Certificate was developed and launched in collaboration with the University of Guelph Ridgetown Campus. This certification consists of a series of online training modules to help agricultural workers stay safe and be aware of how a farm operates. While this certification does not replace hands-on, in-person learning, it is an opportunity to learn basic awareness and health and safety. For a limited time, employers can register their employees at a discounted rate. Visit the website under the Agri-Training tab in early 2021 for more details.

In addition to AgCareers.com and CareersInFood.com, other partners on the Feeding Your Future initiative include the Canadian Agricultural Human Resource Council, Workplace Safety & Prevention Services, Ontario Pork, Beef Farmers of Ontario, Grain Farmers of Ontario, Ontario Agri-Business Association, Ontario Apple Growers, Ontario Berries, South Central Ontario Region Economic Development Corporation, Middlesex Workforce Development Partnership, and the Ontario Agricultural College at the University of Guelph.

To learn more and take advantage of these services, visit feedingyourfuture.ca. This project was funded by the Canadian Agriculture Partnership, a five-year federal-provincial-territorial initiative. **OFA**



Feeding Your Future works to connect agri-food employers to current job seekers, to help fill the labour shortage within Ontario agriculture, now and into the future.

FEEDING YOUR FUTURE MAKES CONNECTIONS BETWEEN FARMERS AND WORKERS

Everyone involved in agri-food knows about the industry's chronic labour shortage and COVID-19 shone a light on the seriousness of the situation.

The numbers tell the tale. In 2018, 60,000 international workers were brought into the country, but we were still short 16,000 workers. The pain was real, and the loss in sales topped out at \$2.9 billion for farmers.

When border restrictions due to the 2020 pandemic threatened to stop the flow of temporary foreign workers from places like Mexico and Jamaica, OFA and the Canadian Federation of Agriculture worked hard to impress on gov-

ernment officials the necessity of allowing them in – while protecting everyone's health and safety.

While the temporary foreign worker issue was somewhat resolved, the ongoing problems with not having enough workers to do agricultural jobs persisted.

Through the Feeding Your Future initiative, AgCareers.com has been working with us to help farmers post jobs for free on their website. Through the AgCareers.com job matching service, farmers can visit the website and create an account. From there, they can specify the job title, wage, and how experienced the candidate should be. A brief job description can be added with support from an AgCareers.com employee if needed, who can also help format the job posting. Farmers can get free access to the service by entering AgriFoodONT20 at the checkout.

"It was a very easy process for us," says Mel Foster, who grows mostly vegetables on 300 of his 500-acre farm located in North Gower between Kemptville and Ottawa. The Foster family produces everything from sweet corn to yellow and green beans, broccoli, squash, pumpkins and strawberries.

Foster had a sales and service position available at the end of July.

"As long as you have a job description, it's a fast way to get employees," he says. "We're seasonal, so if somebody leaves, we need to fill the spots right away." Foster has a number of vegetable stands that he runs in and around Ottawa and the Ottawa Valley. He employs 35 Canadians and 15 temporary foreign workers.

Sandra Zadra was the match that the concierge service came up with. She took early retirement from a high-tech career in the city of Ottawa last year and was looking for part-time work, preferably on a farm.

"I love being outside and I was actually looking to work on a farm with animals initially," she says, adding that she just went onto Google and wound up on the Feeding Your Future site.

Her job meant that she would go to the farm, work with the people who were picking the vegetables, load up with boxes of vegetables, take them to one of the stands and sell produce to customers a couple of days a week. She worked all around the area – Kemptville, Smiths Falls, and in Ottawa itself, on Cedar View and Alta Vista.

"It's a lot of hard work and a lot of heavy lifting – but it's a fun job – I couldn't get to the fitness club during the pandemic, but I stayed in shape!" she says. She also learned a lot about farming, how fresh, local produce is harvested and even found out about dairy farming from one of her co-workers. It gave her a better appreciation of how our farmers take great care to produce the best quality food.

Foster was especially impressed with how the service got back to him at the end of the season to ask how it all went. He'll be using it again for next year.

Both Foster and Zadra are very happy with the experience and Zadra can't wait to go back next year. **OFA**



Davone and Mel Foster of Foster Family Farm stand in front of their sign during the busy fall season.

PETER JEFFERY WRAPS UP HIS OFA CAREER



Peter Jeffery retired from his role with the organization after 33 years.

After 33 years with the OFA, senior farm policy analyst Peter Jeffery retired at the end of 2020.

How did you get your start at OFA?

I began as a member service specialist back in March 1987. In the days before the Farm Business Registration (FBR), I helped members with various farm-related problems they were having – like answering questions about line fences and highway traffic rules. With that job, I built up a big contact list and knowledge of a wide range of subjects. After FBR came into being, research positions opened up and I moved into the policy side of things.

Basically, I look at legislation, regulations and policies and evaluate what their impact is going to be on farmers. I also really like digging into policy and formulating arguments about rules that might have a negative effect.

What were some of the highlights of your career?

Probably the biggest chunk of my time was taken up with land use planning – like severances, municipal official plans and things like that. The implementation of the Greenbelt and Growth Plan were a couple of the bigger issues.

There are mixed feelings on both plans. By and large, with the Greenbelt, the idea of protecting farmland from development was a good thing, but that's the easy part – trying to ensure that there are policies in place so farms can be profitable is the hard part.

The Growth Plan started out well, with a focus on downtown redevelopment and intensification to accommodate population and employment growth. But over time, the targets have softened in the urban areas and the “outer ring” municipalities like Peterborough and Simcoe have the option to develop their own growth targets. Which means

low-density development and more consumption of agricultural land. Plus, there's no real penalty for municipalities that don't reach their targets.

I think a lot of people see agricultural land as a resource that's waiting to be developed, not as the source of our food and a huge support for the food processing, restaurant and grocery industries. We are constantly pointing out to government that the overall agri-food sector, from field-to-fork, is a substantial contributor to the provincial economy.

There's some agricultural development going on in northern Ontario, which is good, but that's not an answer for agricultural land losses in the south, because you can't grow all those crops because of the shorter growing season.

What other achievements are you proud of?

In the late nineties, in conjunction with the Ministry of Transportation and some other commodity organizations, we developed the Farm Guide. It was a 30-page document that answered a lot of questions around rules and regulations for tractors, implements and farm trucks. It pulled together information that was in many different places into one document so that farmers could easily look up what they needed – things like whether you can tow a hay wagon behind your pick-up – which you can. It's a good educational tool that has been updated and is still available.

I'm also proud of keeping the *Line Fences Act* on the books. Last year, the provincial government proposed to repeal the Act and leave the resolution of fence disputes between neighbouring property owners to the local municipality, the courts or both. I provided our Board members with arguments in favour of keeping the Act in effect. Thankfully, the government heeded our advice. **OFA**

HEEMAN'S SURVIVES AND THRIVES THROUGH COVID-19



The Heeman's family found workable solutions and took advantage of unique opportunities to continue serving customers through the COVID-19 pandemic.

When COVID-19 struck, the Heeman family made the difficult decision to close their physical business right away and

move to online commerce.

"We were the only garden centre in our area closed through the entire spring season – from March 16 to June 2," says Will Heeman. "As a family, we just felt the risk to our community was not worth the lost sales opportunity or reopening, even when the province deemed it allowable."

Heeman's has been a fixture in Thorndale northeast of London since 1963. From very humble beginnings, it has grown to be one of the largest greenhouses, garden centres and berry farm operations in southwestern Ontario. It's open 12 months of the year, sells millions of plants, tonnes of fruit and is primarily known for growing and selling strawberries. The family also keeps bees and produces honey, hard cider and mead, along with other products.

Massive demand

The first few weeks were really tough. While they did have an e-commerce platform already, it was nowhere near robust enough for the 6,000 items they eventually loaded



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in their online store. Heeman hired the photographer who shot his wedding to take product pictures that could be uploaded to the site.

The demand for products was so great they had to upgrade their technology because they took up too much space on the web-hosting platform they were sharing with 200 businesses.

“We were getting four million users a month and 120 search results per minute, so we had to upgrade to a dedicated server at the cost of \$2,000 U.S. per month,” he says. The biggest challenge was getting developers who could meet their needs – which meant dealing with companies in two provinces, the U.S., Italy and Ukraine.

At one point, they were fulfilling 752 orders per day or 72 per hour. They would sell out of timeslots by 9:30 in the morning (from opening at midnight) and had to put a \$40 floor on individual orders. Online customers would fill their cart and choose a date and time for curbside pick-up. The reviews from happy shoppers say that it was seamless, efficient and very quick.

They also set up a two-lane drive-through system, initially selling strawberries and asparagus, then adding raspberries, blueberries, cherries, peaches, corn and watermelons through the season.

The drive-through was especially appreciated by the people who were at risk and by parents with small children, who didn’t have to go through the hassle of car seats and strollers, sanitizing hands, and lining up with others to get strawberries, for example. It was so popular the Heeman’s will likely have it as a permanent service in the coming years.

Staff safety

In normal times, they employ between 115 and 150 people throughout the year, depending on the season, but this season required an additional 35 employees to pull orders and cover longer shifts in the greenhouse. To ensure staff safety, they brought in a dozen portables.

Along with the other buildings on the property, they had 18 bathrooms with teams assigned to each bathroom, so only up to four people on a shift would be using any one bathroom. They also created areas where individual teams could eat lunch.

Hours of operation during the peak of the season were 8 a.m. to 8 p.m. with a break midday when no orders were filled to allow a shift change to a new team and for their cleaning crew to clean all the bathrooms, public spaces, knobs, handles and all surfaces. The teams were named Arugula, Basil and Cilantro.

“If you were on Arugula, for example, you’d know that you’d have a morning shift one day, an afternoon the next and off on the third,” he says. They capped the number of hours worked to seven or eight and the number of shifts to four or five a week, depending on the cycle.

They also hired many family members, so if someone had a brother or sister or a mom looking for work – they’d be hired and put on the same team.

Into the future

“The pandemic is the ultimate stress test for the business,” Heeman says, adding that, although he is only 33, he

will be able to say that he came up against great adversity and got through it when he’s 53 or 93.

He says he has had to quickly ramp up his skills and knowledge through the ordeal – which as of October 2020 still wasn’t over.

“There’s a significant number of learnings in terms of inventory management, product selection and ordering practices,” he says.

The company has become very selective about the items they sell because of the time and energy it takes to think about buying it, entering the order, bar-coding it, giving it a spot in the warehouse, on the floor and so on.

“You don’t really realize how difficult you can make things for yourself with all the different products and variations you grow or sell until you have to take a photo of each one, count them every week and add each item to an online store,” he says. “We definitely realized just how many things we carried that we could probably tweak slightly and still serve our guests but make it easier and more profitable for us too.”

Heeman says he wants to maintain the experiential-based business for customers – with a fishpond, a coffee shop and, in non-pandemic times, hosting gardening workshops, yoga sessions and other events. In late summer and through the fall, Heeman’s hosted a ‘Food Trucks on the Farm’ event in their parking lot over the weekends so that people could enjoy socially-distant lunches.

“While we made it work this season, we know we want to stay more than just an online business,” he says, adding that they’re integrating the online and in-store businesses. **OFA**

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FEATURING YOUR FUTURE WITH E'LAYNA BAKER



E'layna Baker, fourth year student at the University of Guelph

With a wide array of careers in the Ontario agri-food sector, there are many opportunities for students and job seekers. From marketing, producing, selling, processing, researching, lobbying or teaching, the career paths for agriculture and food are endless.

The #FeatureYourFuture social media campaign was launched to share the stories of people in various jobs across the industry. By showcasing their journey into agri-food, we hope their path inspires youth to consider a rewarding career in the

sector. Profiles can be found on the Feeding Your Future website on the Ag@Work page or on the @feedingyourfuture Instagram channel.

Meet E'layna Baker, who originally grew up in New Providence, the capital Island of the Bahamas.

"My goal is to enhance the agriculture sector back home, to take the knowledge and skills I've acquired to really make a difference," said Baker.

Growing up in a space outside of North America has

given Baker a unique perspective and influence on her interests in agriculture. Baker moved to Canada three years ago to begin her studies at the University of Guelph and is now in her fourth year. She enrolled in the Food Agriculture and Resource Economics program with a goal of retaining valuable knowledge to put into practice in her home community.

Baker experienced mixed reactions from her family about pursuing a serious career path in agriculture, but gained enough support to attend a Canadian university. Her initial interest in agriculture stemmed from a government-run summer program she attended at the age of 13. She was exposed to the role of government in agriculture, agri-business, crop growth and equipment used to implement practices. A high school teacher who ran this program had inspiring enthusiasm that stuck with Baker and later encouraged her to consider the potential opportunities within this sector.

Baker has always been highly motivated to expand her knowledge and currently holds a part-time job as a project assistant for a consulting and communications agency, Synthesis Agri-Food Network. She is grateful for each of the opportunities that the University of Guelph has offered her and never would have imagined the portal of opportunities that she would be exposed to. Baker is proud to describe the agriculture sector as a collective effort that you can't help but love to be apart of. Despite various challenges she has faced in pursuing this pathway, she enjoys that agriculture is something that continues to challenge her to keep growing and learning beyond academics. **OFA**

FOCUS ON FOOD AND FOCUS ON LIVESTOCK VIDEO SERIES OFFERS FARMER-TO-FARMER ADVICE

OFA is proud to launch a series of training videos highlighting Ontario producers and a behind-the-scenes look at various tasks and skills needed to be successful in the industry. These videos also offer insight on various career opportunities for those who may be exploring jobs in agriculture. The Focus on Food and Focus on Livestock video series are offered through the Feeding Your Future project that includes farmer-to-farmer advice. These videos were developed with industry partners, including Beef Farmers of Ontario, Ontario Apple Growers, Ontario Berry Growers, Ontario Pork, Grain Farmers of Ontario and South Central Ontario Region Economic Development Corporation.

The Focus on Food videos discuss equipping your farm market business with digital options, the benefits of integrated pest management, as well as the need for investment planning. A Conestoga College representative also speaks to a new Agricultural Equipment Operator program with a hands-on, theory-based understanding of operating and maintaining heavy equipment. The Focus on Livestock videos discuss how to effectively maintain herd health through

close observation, animal welfare practices and reliance on nutrition programs. Adhering to biosecurity protocols as a service provider and as a farm operator is also discussed extensively. Each of these videos offers resources and includes various experts to provide multiple perspectives on each topic. There is a practical focus on economic efficiency to benefit any agricultural operation. To learn more about the video series, visit feedingyourfuture.ca. This project was funded by the Canadian Agriculture Partnership, a five-year federal-provincial-territorial initiative. **OFA**



CHALLENGES FACING ONTARIO'S ABATTOIRS AND PROCESSING FACILITIES

Abattoirs and processing plants are essential for livestock and poultry farmers in Ontario. These facilities allow farmers to market locally-grown and processed food to consumers and are critical for Ontario's livestock production sector. Local abattoirs continue to experience significant regulatory burden, financial strains and labour shortages resulting in the decline in small processors across the province. Despite the high demand for services, opportunities for growth within the processing industry is significantly restricted, as too few processors exist to ensure a competitive, healthy marketplace.

OFA is a strong advocate for eliminating unnecessary red tape and regulatory burden for Ontario's agricultural community. In 2019, we supported government changes to regulations under the *Food Safety and Quality Act, 2001*, which would help modernize the regulation, reduce burden and red tape for provincially-licensed food processors. Reducing regulatory burden and red tape will help to facilitate a competitive and healthy meat processing supply chain and lessen some of the financial strains as a result of complying with government regulations.

Funding is critical to the viability of the meat processing sector. Many abattoirs and processing facilities experience significant financial strains, and OFA believes the Ontario government plays a key role in alleviating this stress. Funding is needed for an agriculture and agri-food skills development and training program for in-demand upskilling and career opportunities. Additionally, financial assistance is necessary for abattoirs for food safety upgrades to maintain the high standards for food safety in Ontario.

Skilled labour shortage is a challenge that abattoirs and processing facilities face on an ongoing basis. OFA has advocated for improvements to programs that would help address these challenges, including the Temporary Foreign Workers Program and the Ontario Immigrant Nomination Program. These programs and others have the potential to address the growing gap for trained, permanent workers

facing the agriculture and food-processing sector in Ontario. Facilitating the immigration of trained, skilled workers to rural communities will help grow existing businesses and attract new opportunities for regional economic development.

OFA continues to work alongside livestock commodity organizations on these issues. Additionally, OFA has developed strong working relationships with staff from Meat & Poultry Ontario and the Ontario Livestock Transporters' Alliance. We continue regular communications with all organizations on priority topics and issues for our members, including regulatory burden, labour, animal activism and processing capacity.

The creation of the Meat Industry Engagement Panel, announced in October 2019 by the Ontario government, will help to establish a communication channel and relationship between representatives from the meat processing industry and government. OFA believes this panel offers a valuable opportunity for industry engagement to enhance the sector. Facilitating dialogue and consultations with abattoir operations will further boost communications and encourage suggestions on how processes and safety measures could be improved.

OFA acknowledges and appreciates the government's support and engagement of the sector and continues to advocate for measures aimed to address the challenges faced by local abattoirs and processing facilities. Without assistance, continued processing capacity shortages may cause industries to face lost income that can threaten the viability of Ontario's livestock farmers and farms, livestock truckers, auction barns, processors and other associated industries that make this billion-dollar sector thrive. Sound industry strategic planning, reductions in red tape and burden, and government financial assistance will ensure the economic viability of small-scale local abattoirs and processing facilities, resulting in a sustainable meat processing sector for Ontario. **OFA**



OFA PROVIDES INPUT ON IMPROVING ONTARIO'S PRIVACY PROTECTION

Farm businesses in Ontario put a high priority on protecting and securing their data and proprietary information. The threat of disclosing that information poses a significant risk to the health, safety and security of farms, families and operations across the province.

In early September 2020, OFA participated in a roundtable discussion with the agriculture industry on improving privacy protection and providing feedback to the Ontario government's proposed privacy reforms. In addition to the consultation, OFA also submitted a formal response to the Ministry of Government and Consumer Services with input and key recommendations on improving privacy protection for the agriculture industry.

OFA fully supports this initiative to address concerns and reassess the priorities for protecting private information. We applaud the Ontario government's intention to address gaps in the legislative privacy framework and to establish comprehensive, up-to-date rules that will protect privacy rights.

We believe the personal information of our 38,000 farm family members should be protected and not released without the consent of the member. It has the potential to cause severe financial loss to farm businesses through possible fraudulent use of the information by the individual collecting it or may be used to facilitate identity theft.

In a written submission to the government, OFA outlined that in the case of many farmers, as with some other

business owners, their personal information is the same as their business information. Therefore, any release of business information consequently results in the release of their personal information. In these cases, we believe the business information should be afforded the same protections and privacy considerations as personal information.

OFA strongly recommends that the *Freedom of Information and Protection of Privacy Act (FIPPA)* be amended to ensure that business information be treated as personal information when the business and personal information are similar. OFA also recommended the Ontario government remove and cease to make available through Ontario's Open Data, or any other initiative, all business information that has the potential to identify, or may be used to identify, personal information.

OFA fully supports the proposal to increase transparency for individuals by providing them with more detail about how their information is being used by businesses and organizations; having clear consent provisions allowing individuals to revoke consent at any time, and adopting an "opt-in" model for secondary uses of their information; and giving individuals the right to obtain their data in a standard and portable digital format.

OFA will continue to monitor the progress of Ontario's privacy reform and advocate to protect the privacy and security of our farm operations. **OFA**

WORKING FOR FARMERS AGAINST RISING FARM PROPERTY TAXES

Farmers will get a bit of a reprieve from property assessments this year, due to the pandemic, but OFA will continue lobbying municipal organizations to get more rural communities onside to reduce tax ratios at the local level.

The year 2020 was supposed to be the final year of the four-year cycle that the Municipal Property Assessment Corporation (MPAC) uses to assess property values across the province. Complications arising from COVID-19 meant that the 2021-24 assessments have been pushed back to 2022-2025 and MPAC assessments of farmland have been frozen at the 2020 level. Still, the average increase in farm assessment values in 2016 was 64 per cent.

In addition, for this year, the freeze doesn't mean that property taxes won't go up. Base tax levels could be increased by individual municipalities, and the trend of farmers taking on more of the property tax burden continues.

The current Farm Property Class Tax Rate Program pegs farmland taxes – excluding the house and at least an acre of land around it – at no more than 25 per cent of the municipal rate.

OFA continues to work with county and single-tier municipal governments to get that ratio lowered to reduce the tax burden on farmers. To date, 18 governments have done this, including Norfolk at 23 per cent, Halton at 20 per cent and North Bay at 15 per cent.

OFA recognizes that rural municipalities are hurting financially, which is why we continue to lobby the provincial government to provide proper funding to them for infrastructure needs, as part of our Producing Prosperity in Ontario campaign, and to increase funding to the Ontario Municipal Partnership Fund. We are committed to continuing to work with our rural municipal partners.

We are also working with county federations who feel the tax ratio in their municipalities could come down. We're putting an added effort this year into reaching out to municipal organizations like the Rural Ontario Municipal Association.

Any member concerned about the tax ratio in their area can contact their local federation or their Member Service Representative. **OFA**

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OUR AGRICULTURE: CULTIVATING OPPORTUNITIES FOR ONTARIO'S FRANCOPHONE FARM FAMILIES / NOTRE AGRICULTURE: CULTIVER LES OPPORTUNITÉS POUR LES FAMILLES AGRICOLES FRANCOPHONES DE L'ONTARIO

OFA is excited to launch a new program, Our AgriCulture: Cultivating Opportunities for Ontario's Francophone Farm Families, funded through the Francophone Community Grants Program administered by the Ministry of Francophone Affairs.

In 2020, there were nearly 650 OFA members who identified French as their primary language, with nine regions having five or more French speaking members. Along with our bilingual staff and benefit program information, this project will strengthen OFA's capacity to provide valuable information and further support for local federations in French-speaking areas to connect with the general public and advocate on behalf of local farmers' needs.

OFA will work alongside l'Union des Cultivateurs Franco-Ontariens (UCFO) to translate resources and OFA webpages on programs and policies, and information to support volunteer board capacity development, farmer mental health and farm safety. The translated resources will be launched in early 2021.

OFA supports inclusivity and addressing the diverse needs of our members. This project will celebrate diversity in the farm community and enhance OFA's ability to communicate and advocate on issues that impact its farm members and rural communities.

Notre AgriCulture: Cultiver les opportunités pour les familles agricoles francophones de l'Ontario

La FAO est ravie de lancer un nouveau programme, Notre AgriCulture: Cultiver les opportunités pour les familles agricoles francophones de l'Ontario, financé par le Programme d'appui à la francophonie ontarienne, administré par le Ministère des Affaires francophones.

En 2020, près de 650 membres de la FAO ont identifié le français comme langue principale, avec neuf régions comptant au moins cinq membres francophones. En plus de notre personnel bilingue et de l'information sur les programmes d'avantages sociaux, ce projet renforcera la capacité de la FAO à fournir des informations précieuses et un soutien supplémentaire aux fédérations locales des régions francophones pour se connecter avec le grand public et défendre les besoins des agriculteurs locaux.

La FAO travaillera aux côtés de l'Union des Cultivateurs Franco-Ontariens (UCFO) pour traduire des ressources et des pages Web de la FAO sur les programmes et les politiques, ainsi que des informations pour soutenir le développement des capacités des conseils bénévoles, la santé mentale des agriculteurs et la sécurité à la ferme. Les ressources traduites seront lancées au début de 2021.

La FAO soutient l'inclusivité et répond aux divers besoins de nos membres. Ce projet célébrera la diversité au sein de la communauté agricole et améliorera la capacité de la FAO à communiquer et à défendre les intérêts de ses membres et des communautés rurales. **OFA**

OFA'S ALWAYS IN SEASON PROJECT CELEBRATES THE BOUNTY OF AGRI-FOOD PRODUCTS AVAILABLE YEAR-ROUND

In 2020, OFA launched the Always in Season project to provide new opportunities for farmers for direct farm marketing, value-added agriculture, agri-tourism, and culinary tourism, to increase local food sales, and to elevate the brand of local farm products. Through Canadian Agricultural Partnership funding, OFA, 12 partners, and Wilton Consulting Group developed the Always in Season toolkit to offer communities ideas for activities, funding opportunities, and ways to collaborate to support the agri-food sector.

While the importance of the agri-food sector is not a new concept, especially to OFA members, the project aims to keep it top of mind for communities who may have less experience supporting agriculture and food businesses. OFA members can capitalize on this renewed interest in supporting local food and agriculture by working with their municipality and community organizations.

Between August and October 2020, the Always in Season webpage had over 1,600 visitors and the toolkit was downloaded and viewed nearly 850 times. An August webinar hosted by OFA and the Ontario Ministry of Agriculture, Food and Rural Affairs saw 110 registrants participate to learn more about the project. Responses indicated that 95% were satisfied or very satisfied with the webinar.

The toolkit includes many tips, templates, and innovative ideas for communities, particularly during events such as Local Food Week, Ontario Agriculture Week, Canadian Agricultural Literacy Month, Canada's Ag Day, and Food Day Canada. Leading up to Ontario Agriculture Week in October, Farm & Food Care Ontario worked with OFA to develop the I ♥ Local Social Media Planning Kit to assist in the celebrations. The @ontarioagrifood Twitter handle was developed and has gained over 200 followers in under two months. Several community organizations took to social

media to celebrate their local agricultural sector using the graphics, pre-crafted messages and economic impact statistics.

OFA was proud to partner on this project with Wilton Consulting Group, Golden Horseshoe Food and Farming Alliance, Greenbelt Foundation, South Central Ontario Region Economic Development Corporation, Northern Ontario Farm Innovation Alliance, Greenbelt Fund, Meat and Poultry Ontario, Rural Ontario Institute, Food and Beverage Ontario, Rural Agri-Innovation Network, Ontario Fruit and Vegetable Growers' Association, Ontario East Economic Development Commission and Farm and Food Care Ontario.

This project was funded by the Canadian Agriculture Partnership, a five-year federal-provincial-territorial initiative. Visit ofa.on.ca/AlwaysinSeason to learn more and download the Always in Season resources. **OFA**



SIX BY SIXTEEN COOKS UP PROJECTS, INITIATIVES AND PARTNERSHIPS

Six by Sixteen had a busy year cooking up food literacy projects and partnerships. With youth at home isolated from friends and without access to extracurricular activities, OFA's food literacy initiative found it an opportune time to further the promotion of food literacy.

Despite COVID-19, Ontario's agri-food sector had plenty to celebrate this year. Six by Sixteen partnered with AgScape, Farm & Food Care Ontario and commodity organizations to commemorate Ontario's Local Food Week. Using Farm & Food Care's Farm to Facebook platform consumers were invited to virtually tour a dairy farm, grain farm, strawberry farm, turkey farm, egg farm and greenhouse operation. At the end of the farm tours, viewers were hosted by well-known chef Andrea Buckett, and shown how to use the week's locally sourced ingredients to make a delicious all Ontario meal.

Ontario Agriculture Week was also celebrated virtually in partnership with Farm & Food Care Ontario and commodity organizations bringing consumers Thanksgiving

101. For many, small dinner gatherings resulted in first time chefs attempting to tackle a turkey dinner. Consumers were invited to virtually watch cooking demos that encouraged sourcing local Ontario ingredients. Popular chefs, Jennifer MacKenzie and Jay Nutt, taught viewers how to locally source and prepare turkey gravy, turkey with maple thyme glaze, stuffing, apple chutney and pumpkin pie.

A silver lining of COVID-19 has been a newfound demand and appreciation for locally grown and produced food. This momentum paired with in-person limitations inspired OFA to create Six by Sixteen's Virtual Food Literacy Challenge. With the help of Growing Chefs Ontario, Six by Sixteen's dietitian developed recipe guide has been converted to videoed cooking tutorials for youth and families to watch from the safety and convenience of their home. The virtual food literacy challenge features eight dietitian developed recipe videos, an introduction to knife safety and food handling. Youth can follow along as a certified chef demonstrates how to source and prepare eight recipes using local food. Families can find the videos and take the challenge at youtube.com/ontariofarms.

Six by Sixteen will continue to champion for food literacy alongside fellow stakeholders and commodity organizations. Teaching the next generation of consumers how to locally source and prepare meals helps arm them with the tools they need to make lifelong healthy food choices and supports local farmers and communities. For more information, visit sixbysixteen.me. **OFA**



We've cooked up something special!

SUPPORT FOR WOMEN IN ONTARIO AGRICULTURE A STEP TOWARDS INCREASED DIVERSITY



Women have always played a vital role in agriculture, but it was often undocumented, unacknowledged and unquantified. In the past, farming has been viewed as a male-dominated industry, which lacked visible female representation.

However, the landscape of the Ontario agriculture sector has increasingly diversified to include women. The industry is experiencing a visible shift in women as documented owners and managers. While the number of farms in Ontario decreased by 13% from 2006 to 2016, the number of farms with female operators increased by 12%.

Still, women leadership is underrepresented in the Ontario agriculture sector. In a 2015 Canadian Agricultural Human Resource Council (CAHRC) study, only 8 of the 65 Canadian agricultural associations surveyed had a woman as their board Chair or President, and only 28% had at least one woman on their board. OFA is proud to have five strong

and influential female board members, including Peggy Brekvelde as President.

The CAHRC study found that women still identified barriers to advancing in the field of agriculture (41%) as well as a tension between balancing career and family responsibilities (16%). Another 16% spoke of the ‘old boys club’ and 13% noted a lack of female role models in leadership positions. Access to childcare, gendered roles and responsibilities, different levels of on-and off-farm expectations, access to resources, off farm work, lack of involvement in policy, and lack of organizational representation, were also listed as significant barriers.

Our sector still has some collective work to do in reducing the hurdles that prevent under-represented populations from equal participation and representation. Several of the barriers women face are infrastructure and resource related, however, an overwhelming factor restricting women’s involvement in agriculture are pre-existing stereotypes. OFA conducted a survey in January 2020 that found 67% of female respondents indicated they had been disrespected because of their gender.

As women in agriculture continue to overcome barriers and break glass ceilings, OFA is committed to ensuring that all voices in our sector have the opportunity to participate and be heard. Ontario’s agriculture sector is strong and dynamic due to its diversity of producers and commodities grown.

Our industry has a role to play in supporting equality, diversity and inclusion in our workplaces, our boardrooms, our governments, and in our society. We are stronger when everyone has a seat at the table. **OFA**

ACCOMPLISHED PROVINCIAL DIRECTOR RETIRES



Debra Pretty-Straathof steps down from her role as provincial director after more than 20 years of dedication to OFA.

As she looks back on her tenure with the OFA board of directors, Debra Pretty-Straathof feels fortunate to have had the experience.

“It’s truly an honour and a privilege to have served,” she says.

Pretty-Straathof stepped down after 21 years in a number of roles, including as Vice President for two years. She represented Zone 8,

which includes Arnprior, Lanark, Ottawa and Renfrew.

One of her high points was representing the Canadian Federation of Agriculture (CFA) on the Farm Women’s Committee of the World Farmers’ Organization (WFO) for four years. She made presentations about what farmers require to help deal with the effects of climate change in workshops at the WFO Annual Congress in both Italy and Zambia.

“That was an incredible experience – I was very impressed with what farm women around the world do,” she says. “Everyone came from such varied backgrounds and countries. They’re strong women who are striving to increase recognition of the pivotal role of women farmers and are advocating for the empowerment of women’s role in agriculture.”

An ongoing highlight was getting to work with the local federations and farm leaders from across Ontario and Canada.

“They are all giving back to their sectors, their communities and their country,” she reminisced.

Pretty-Straathof is also very conscious of the importance of taking OFA positions – which are often crafted from resolutions sent to OFA from local federations – to Queen’s Park and Parliament Hill.

“With the privilege of being a director comes a huge responsibility, so you do your homework and make sure you’re on message,” she says. “It’s a challenge – but I loved trying to affect improvements for farmers.”

“I would be very remiss if I didn’t mention our incredible OFA and CFA staff and the excellent work they do at the local, provincial and national levels with research and expertise that enables us to do the effective work of the OFA on behalf of our membership and rural communities.”

Pretty-Straathof also welcomed the variety of roles she took on, and it shows in her resumé.

She represented OFA on everything from the Ontario Agri-Food Technology board to acting as a liaison to various commodity organizations including the Dairy Farmers of Ontario and the Ontario Sheep Farmers. Debra chaired the OFA Science and Technology Committee and its Finance Committee as well as the CFA Taxation Committee. She was also a member of the OFA’s Farm Finance, Trade and Taxation Committee and the CFA Biotech Advisory Committee. More recently, the board chose her to represent the organization as one of two delegates to The Co-operators.

She’s been very active in her community as a former

Dairy Educator and a past-chair of a local Agri-Food Education committee and earned an Award of Merit for her efforts. Pretty-Straathof helped create a number of agricultural events including the Farm Comes to Town, the original Rural Ramble and the Farmers on the Hill lobby day which engaged 12 Eastern Ontario Federations, OFA, CFA and others for over a decade.

Her enthusiasm for education led Pretty-Straathof to enrol at Algonquin College – while still working on her family dairy farm and raising three children – to earn an honours diploma in Public Relations.

“I wanted to learn how to communicate with stakeholders more effectively,” she says. Those skills stayed with her as she, along with the OFA team, presented a wide range of challenges that Ontario farmers face, and the solutions required, to various government representatives and the media.

As to the future of OFA, she says she’d like to see the organization ‘keep up the good work and continue to strive for excellence.’

“I think we have efficient farm to plate systems in Ontario and Canada, however the pandemic has made us realize they can also be fragile, so that needs to be addressed,” she says, adding that she hopes the OFA takes the time to do some blue-sky thinking, keeps an eye on trends and continues to listen to the membership. **OFA**

OFA WELCOMES NEWEST BOARD MEMBER FROM EASTERN ONTARIO



Jennifer Doelman joins the OFA board of directors representing members in Arnprior, Lanark, Ottawa and Renfrew.

Jennifer Doelman, the OFA’s newest board member, is a very energetic, busy woman with a young family who lives on a farm located an hour northwest of Ottawa.

Representing the eastern Ontario region of Arnprior, Lanark, Ottawa and Renfrew (Zone 8), she’s taking over from long-time board member and former Vice Presi-

dent, Debra Pretty-Straathof.

She’s a third-generation seed producer and, along with her husband and parents grows a variety of grains including corn, soybeans, wheat, barley canola, flax, oats, triticale, peas, forages and sunflowers. She’s a University of Guelph graduate, an independent Ontario Certified Crop Advisor and an alumna of the Advanced Agricultural Leadership Program.

She is involved with many organizations, including the

Ontario Soil Network, the Ontario Canola Growers, Grain Farmers of Ontario, Renfrew County 4-H Association and the Renfrew County Soil & Crop Improvement Association.

How long have you been farming?

Officially, I’ve been farming since 2006 when I married my husband, but I grew up on a farm, so did the chores when I was a teenager and helped with the books when I went to university. I’ve wanted to be a farmer since I was 22. Before that, I was never coming back to the farm – ever.

What are you most passionate about in agriculture?

Sustainability – environmental, but also fiscal, mental and every other way. I’m a scientist at heart and love understanding complex systems. I really enjoy agronomy and being a change-maker in our local economy. I find that, right now in rural, there’s a disconnect between ideals and what actually happens on the ground. For example, with the Clean Fuels issue – it seems like a good idea in theory, but there’s a disparity with the wording of the program. I want to fight the fight for farmers while helping us connect with policymakers and consumers by celebrating our shared goals and values.

I also like looking at conflict as an opportunity to solve problems. I became a beekeeper because of the whole neonic issue. I wanted to understand how following best management practices on my farm actually impacted pollinator health – it’s actually made me a better farmer and a better

beekeeper, I think. I'm excited to work with others to tackle some bigger issues.

What are your plans as an OFA board member?

I want to really focus on engagement – for OFA members and farmers in general. I find that there's some apathy in the community right now. Maybe it's because there's so much going on with the pandemic. I am concerned that the succession planning of rural leadership is in danger. In my experience, there seems to be a technology barrier that is

limiting the engagement of some community leaders. On the positive side, virtual technology is a great new opportunity for engaging with younger farmers who aren't as likely to participate in traditional meetings.

I want to be accessible for the folks here in eastern Ontario – to help them feel a little less isolated and a little more connected.

I also think it's important to get more diversity into the organization – having different ways of seeing things can only strengthen it. **OFA**

PAST PRESIDENT KEITH CURRIE REFLECTS ON FOUR YEARS OF LEADERSHIP



Keith Currie, Past President, 2016-2020

We asked Past President Keith Currie to reflect on four years as the organization's leader and provide us with some knowledge and insights from his experience.

What has been a 'win' for OFA's advocacy work that you're most proud of?

I'm very proud of our position in the industry right now. As a board and an organization, we've evolved collectively to having the ear of government to give input on any topic at any time. We're probably as strong as we've ever been, and people want to be a part of the work that we're doing.

We've celebrated some movement in legislation for the livestock community in the past year with the implementation of the *Provincial Animal Welfare Services Act* and Bill 156. The collaboration between commodities, industry representatives and government to enact responsible legislation ... getting everyone to these tables has been remarkable. When we have multiple organizations speaking to government about the same things we are – that's powerful.

Despite all the challenges, we experienced dozens of small wins to help navigate this pandemic. From support for e-commerce platforms, personal protective equipment and crop insurance for production losses related labour loss – these programs changed people's businesses.

What do you want members to know about the work OFA is doing on their behalf?

I think members appreciate the work that goes on behind the scenes, but don't always realize the amount and type of work that goes on. Our staff and board are constantly taking member input and their needs into account and responding to those individuals. There is an incredible amount of relationship-building that leads to the wide-reaching initiatives that improve our sector.

Any advice for those thinking of taking on leadership roles in a provincial organization?

I encourage everyone to consider leadership when the time is right. It doesn't come without time and commitment and support at home, but it is extremely rewarding when you get involved, from the people you meet inside and outside of the organization, which create so many friendships.

I've learned to approach meetings with possible solutions as well as an open mind, realizing there may be a different approach to reach that end goal. I'm always prepared to have my mind changed.

You need a team around you as well. I've had a solid executive that I could count on, which was a huge benefit. It is important to remember why you ran for those positions and never lose sight of the passion and reason that got you there.

What do you see in the future for OFA? For yourself?

In the short term, I will continue on the board, working for the membership and the industry. With a clear focus I see the leadership of OFA driving this industry forward, creating wins across the province with programs and regulatory reforms to allow the industry to thrive. The sky's the limit.

I'm looking forward to some other roles in agriculture and will continue with my work at the Canadian Federation of Agriculture. On the federal front, we've made some leaps forward in terms of pulling the industry together which is a real positive. For the immediate future, I am taking time to breathe. I'm looking forward to a chance to decompress and focus a bit more at home with farming, family and grandchildren.

I've always felt that when one door closes, another one opens. So, I will keep my options open. **OFA**

LOOKING AHEAD TO FUTURE PRIORITIES AND OPPORTUNITIES IN AGRICULTURE

OFA is optimistic for the future of Ontario's agriculture industry, despite the many challenges and obstacles created by COVID-19.

Maintaining food safety and security, dealing with significant labour shortages, standing up for responsible land use planning and environmental sustainability, pushing for better rural infrastructure, reducing red tape and moving forward in research and development – including developing the organization's leadership – are all on the agenda for 2021 and beyond.



Food safety and security

The pandemic highlighted the integration of the food supply chain and how disruptions in one link can have devastating effects up and down the line. It also demonstrated the resilience of our farmers and how they worked cohesively to keep food flowing from their farms to the grocery store shelves. Collectively, we rolled up our sleeves to fulfill our responsibility of keeping consumer plates full of fresh, healthy and affordable food.

It became immediately clear that transporters, processors and retailers need to be thriving in order for farmers to be successful. The shutdown of restaurants and the hospitality industry magnified the cracks in the system's ability to pivot quickly from one type of market to another – it was accomplished, but not without some serious bumps along the way.

A positive outcome was how local food became a hot commodity as people looked to buy from their neighbours. Many farmers shifted to online sales and found new ways to move their products to market.

It will be critical to maintain that momentum and ensure consumers and government policymakers recognize the powerful economic force the agri-food industry can be for the economy in the pandemic recovery and beyond.

Canadians' trust in the agri-food sector is at an all-time high. The 2020 Canadian Centre for Food Integrity's consumer survey reported that trust in the system's ability to ensure a steady supply of high-quality food increased significantly from 2019.

As farmers, food safety is always a top priority, and today many consumers have become more mindful of the foods they are purchasing. They are interested in knowing more about the farming practices that consider safety, animal welfare, nutrition and sustainability, which makes the practice of telling the stories behind the food all the more relevant.

Land use and the environment

As the province and country emerge from the pandemic, it is important to emphasize the crucial link between producing a stable supply of food and protecting the land on which it grows. Preserving agricultural land for the purpose of food production and processing is a key priority for OFA.

Without access to arable land, we are jeopardizing the local agri-food system. Protecting agricultural land benefits all Ontarians.

There has been a concerning trend toward circumventing the municipal planning process through the *Planning Act* and the Provincial Policy Statement, which has served farmers, developers and community planners very well. It allows farmers and local residents to have a voice and share their input on how their communities grow while preserving productive land.

OFA has expressed its concerns to the Hon. Steve Clark, Minister of Municipal Affairs and Housing regarding the recent proliferation of Minister's Zoning Orders (MZOs) issued for municipalities with robust planning systems, Official Plans and Zoning By-laws. This frequent use undermines Ontario's long-established system of land use planning. MZOs were originally developed as a backstop for unregistered municipalities so they could move forward with growth plans.

In some areas, orders are being given to convert prime agricultural land into industrial developments. This can lead to issues such as increased traffic during harvest with farm equipment on the roads, to added restrictions expanding buildings on farms due to minimum distance restrictions. OFA opposes the government's abuse of its MZO powers and will continue to raise our concerns about these issues with elected officials.

Consumers are looking for food that is produced in an environmentally sustainable way, and farmers have a vested interest in caring for land, soil, water and ecosystems. With programs such as the Environmental Farm Plan, Integrated Pest Management, the newer 4-R stewardship efforts and recent work aimed at keeping toxic algal blooms out of Lake Erie, we're continuing to make strides in protecting what we have and using new tools and techniques to improve on our efforts.

Having a presence on the province's Climate Change Panel – among other important projects and collaborations – will help bring farmers' contributions and concerns to government policies and programs in the future.



Prosperity initiative is a comprehensive approach to supporting rural economic development and tapping the full potential of our sector. Besides broadband, we are advocating for greater access to natural gas, better transportation corridors and continued access to rural schools.

As with the broadband push, we've had some success in getting the province to bring natural gas pipelines to our farms and communities – a clean, relatively inexpensive source of energy that can power both our industry and businesses and institutions in our small towns. Projects across the province under the Natural Gas Expansion Program are underway, and we'll keep monitoring progress to ensure broader access.

Labour issues

While farmers have been aware of the chronic labour shortage in agriculture for years, the pandemic revealed our dependence on essential seasonal workers to the rest of the country.

Farmers were anxious in the spring with the uncertainties surrounding approvals and travel for the 20,000 workers our provincial industry relies on every year for the growing and harvesting seasons. These valued employees contribute to the productivity of our entire food system and we depend on their contributions to ensure Ontarians have a reliable, affordable and safe food supply, year-round.

Many farmers made massive adjustments and investments in protective equipment and implemented new health and safety protocols to reduce the risk of COVID-19 and enhance on-farm safety measures.

OFA collaborated with the Ontario government and commodity organizations to develop a comprehensive strategy to prevent and control COVID-19 outbreaks on farms. The strategy is founded on three pillars: before getting on the farm; on the farm; and farm worker housing. It contains 35 actions and recognizes that all of us – governments at all levels, organizations, farmers and workers – have a role to play moving forward.

Another way we're helping to address labour gaps is by providing job-matching services through the Feeding Your Future initiative. We're looking forward to introducing new training opportunities in 2021.

These projects are bringing our sector to light, encouraging more young people to see and seize the opportunities available in this dynamic and innovative sector.

Rural infrastructure

Reliable broadband internet is a necessity, and the pandemic magnified the need for our rural communities to have full access to this infrastructure.

While governments were working toward getting high-speed services to rural and remote areas, COVID-19, along with its stay-in-place restrictions, showed how essential these services are to conducting business, offering education, meetings and connecting with friends and family.

As a result, the Ontario government earmarked nearly \$1 billion to expand and improve access to broadband and cellular coverage, while the federal government has kicked in an additional \$1.75 billion. Rural communities are our hubs, and they need to be vibrant if we want our industry to thrive. That means having banks, recreational centres and schools with enough students to fill them. Our Producing

Collaboration

OFA has a lot to be proud of. We aim to be inclusive in our decision-making to bring forward the issues and policies that are truly important to Ontario farmers. We remain committed to doing more to cultivate the next generation of OFA leaders as well.

Our board is a proactive, dedicated and hard-working group of farmers and industry professionals. Our skilled staff are always ready and able to provide members with the support they need in times of questions or crisis. That shone through, especially during COVID-19. The Policy Advisory Council members and county federation representatives continue to ensure we have strong local leadership, while providing grassroots input on key issues and policy direction at the provincial level. They are committed to improving the organization and the business of farming for all farm families across the province.

None of our achievements are possible without collaboration. Working in step with federal, provincial and municipal policymakers, industry stakeholders, commodity organizations and associations with a vested interest in the industry has been vital in keeping the agri-food sector strong and resilient. These relationships have allowed us to work collectively to address ongoing issues that our industry continues to face, both from before, or as a result of the health crisis.

OFA staff and board members will continue to expand our network and collaborate with industry stakeholders through 2021, identifying new ways to support and grow the agri-food sector, and achieve our priorities. We recognize the importance of collaboration to amplify our industry's voice and work together for a better, safer, more equitable and prosperous future for all.

As the African proverb states, 'If you want to go fast, go alone. If you want to go far, go together.' **OFA**





Illustrating OFA's diverse involvement

This word cloud illustrates our dedication, involvement and advocacy in all corners of Ontario's agri-food industry. Our staff, executive and board members sit at many tables municipally, provincially and federally advocating for *Farms and Food Forever*. Collectively, we are involved in more than 70 committees, boards, councils and working groups, shaping policy and regulations that improve the profitability and sustainability of our sector. These commitments addressing priorities and issues directly impact the livelihood of our 38,000 farm family members.

We are proud of our board and staff team who share their passion and knowledge to strengthen the agri-food sector and our rural communities across Ontario.

OFA: Proud of our most valuable resource... our people.

New online training provides an introduction to agriculture

Have you recently hired, or do you know someone who would benefit from learning the basics of working on a farm safely?

The Ontario Federation of Agriculture (OFA) has launched the **Ontario Agriculture Worker Safety and Awareness Certificate**.

OFA has partnered with the University of Guelph Ridgetown Campus to develop the certificate in collaboration with health and safety partners. The certificate will provide a broad overview of working on a farm, whether an individual is new to agriculture or looking for a refresher course.

This online certificate offers several e-learning modules, including:

- A broad overview of health and safety on a farm
- An introduction to farm equipment operation and safety
- An introduction to both crop and livestock farm operations

The modules can be completed all at once in a day or two, or over time at your own pace.

Want to ensure that everyone is safe and confident working on your farm? Register today! Visit feedingyourfuture.ca/agri-training.

OFA: Supporting Ontario's farm workforce.

This project was funded by the Canadian Agricultural Partnership, a five-year federal-provincial-territorial initiative.

