

Why it matters – summary of OFA research projects and initiatives

OFA directly invests time, funding and resources to a variety of research projects and initiatives that are designed to help the organization strengthen its policies and develop positions on issues relevant to the agri-food sector.

OFA research projects

Mapleton cost of community services study

A cost of community services study provides a snapshot of each land use's fiscal impact on a municipality in a particular year, particularly total revenues and expenses related to each land use. This illustrates how much it costs the municipality to provide services for each dollar of revenue received. The Township of Mapleton in Wellington County is partnering with OFA to host such a study, which is focused on industrial, commercial, farm and forestry land use categories.

Why this matters: One of OFA's top priorities is producing prosperity in Ontario, which includes distributing economic development more evenly throughout the province. This research helps illustrate the need for adequate provincial funding for rural communities, as well as the economic benefit of farmland and why it must be protected.

Economic impact of the agri-food value chain in the Greenbelt and farm case studies

This research looks at how agriculture in the Greenbelt feeds the regional economy and the complexity of its agri-food economic relationships. In 2020, the agri-food sector in the Greenbelt generated \$4.1 billion in GDP and supported approximately 59,000 jobs. Consistent challenges faced by farmers in the region include farmland loss, climate change, and loss of local service providers to support the sector.

Why this matters: Economic impact and case studies are great ways to illustrate the importance of farms and land use, the role of supply chains, and the diversity of services that are essential to support the agri-food sector in food production.

Renewable natural gas farm cluster project

This study looks at how changing key factors impact the development of agricultural renewable natural gas (RNG) projects that are economically viable. RNG clustering pools feedstock from multiple farms to support larger scale anaerobic digestion projects than an individual farm could on its own. The research found that under the right conditions, agricultural RNG clusters can make a large contribution to the generation of renewable natural gas and greening the natural gas grid, as well as add value to food and organic waste.

Why this matters: Farms and rural communities need reliable access to affordable energy. On-farm anaerobic digestion systems can play a key role in reducing agricultural greenhouse gas emissions, while adding value to waste to produce renewable energy.

Best practices for on-farm diversified uses

Protecting farmland is a leading priority for OFA, but it can be challenging to achieve the appropriate balance between farmland preservation, economic development and agricultural viability. This study identified existing planning policies, strategies, and best practices, and looked at their effectiveness and impact on farmers. Both farmers and planners see the benefit of farmland preservation and on-farm diversification, but expansion of on-farm diversified uses could benefit from enhanced working relationships between municipalities, Ontario Ministry of Agriculture, Food and Rural Affairs and various farm organizations.

Why it matters: Farmland is a finite resource and as it disappears, so does our ability to feed ourselves. Expanding on-farm diversification opportunities can make farm businesses more viable and help support rural economic development.

Accelerating ag tech adoption

The Niagara Community Observatory is leading a study on how to improve technology transfer and adoption of automation, robotics and other technologies in the agriculture sector. The goal is to understand how new technologies are being adopted, what barriers exist and how to overcome those barriers to improve efficiency.

Why it matters: Innovation and technology is essential to helping the agricultural sector produce more with less, and addressing broad-ranging problems like climate change, labour shortages and sector competitiveness.

Initiatives

Ontario soil health initiatives

OFA supports several initiatives focused on improving soil health in Ontario. The Ontario Soil and Crop Improvement Association, an OFA partner organization, is leading applied soil health research, including Living Lab Ontario, the ONFARM program and regional Tier Two projects, as well developing and delivering educational tools. The OSCIA also delivers cost-share incentive programs for farmers and supports a University of Guelph soil health graduate scholarship, the OSCIA Soil Champion award, and several collaborative soil health ventures.

Why it matters: Healthy soil is the basis for crop productivity and is foundational in regenerative agriculture and other practices that support agriculture's role in climate change mitigation.

OFA initiatives

OFA works closely with its county federations and industry partners to develop and deliver programs that support farmers and rural communities. These include:

- Slow Moving Vehicle sign initiatives in partnership with county federations
 - Making slow moving vehicle signs available
- Resilient Fields project with Christian Farmers Federation of Ontario
 - A free app to help growers find sustainable solutions for field-based problems

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- 4R Nutrient Stewardship with Fertilizer Canada
 - Solutions for farmers to reduce environmental impacts while maximizing crop yields and economic benefits
 - Farm plastics recycling with county federations in Northern Ontario
 - Feasible, affordable options for recycling farm plastics
 - Farmer Wellness Initiative in partnership and collaboration with Canadian Mental Health Association – Ontario Division and LifeWorks
 - Telehealth mental wellness support line for Ontario farmers and their families
 - Accessible 24 hours a day, seven days a week, every day of the year, in English and French. Call anytime at 1-866-267-6255

As an organization, OFA also takes the lead on programs that provide benefit to OFA members and partners across the province. One example is Feeding Your Future, which is designed to help address the labour gap in agriculture. It includes a job-matching service, virtual career fairs, webinars, and training opportunities such as the Ontario Agriculture Worker training certificate.