

Ontario Federation of Agriculture

Submission to the

Standing Committee on the Interior

on the

Agricultural Research Institute of Ontario
Amendment Act, 2024

(Bill 155)

March 19, 2024

BACKGROUND:

The Ontario Federation of Agriculture (OFA) is the largest general farm organization in Ontario, proudly representing more than 38,000 farm family members. OFA has a strong voice for our members and the agri-food industry on issues, legislation and regulations administered by all levels of government. We are passionate and dedicated to ensuring that the agri-food sector and rural communities are considered and consulted with for any new or changing legislation that would impact the sustainability and growth of our farm businesses.

Consulting with the farm community is imperative to a thriving agricultural industry and economy in Ontario - to collaborate on research needs and priorities, encourage innovation and achieve the goals in the province's ambitious Grow Ontario agri-food strategy.

Agriculture is a knowledge-based industry. Research is essential for the sector's future competitiveness, focusing on improved genetics, efficient systems, and safer, better-quality products. OFA believes that agri-food research is a critical tool for Ontario farmers, providing new technologies and practices that improve agricultural productivity, develop new agricultural products, and sustain Ontario's soil, air, and water resources.

OFA welcomes this opportunity to provide input and present recommendations on Bill 155, the Agricultural Research Institute of Ontario Amendment Act, 2024.

PROPOSED CHANGES:

The ARIO Act was created in 1962 and has not been updated since the early 1990's. Modernizing the ARIO Act to reflect the current agri-food research environment and updating the role ARIO plays is a positive step in addressing the research and innovation needs of the agri-food sector.

OFA supports the updated language in Bill 155. The modernized definition of research removes the previous narrow focus and provides scope. The addition of Innovation in the ARIO name, and as a defined term, is reflective of current research and innovation initiatives and aligns with the focus of the Grow Ontario strategy to strengthen the agri-food sector.

OFA generally supports the clarity provided in naming the ARIO as a Crown Agency. Subsequently, this defines and clarifies fiduciary responsibilities of the corporation, which is of benefit. Similarly, the updates to governance provide clarity and the ability to strike committees with representation from non-Board members allows for broader engagement across the agri-food sector.

However, OFA has also identified some areas of concern relating to the changes reflected in Bill 155, as well as some areas requiring further clarification. These are noted in the following, along with comments for consideration.

PROPOSED MANDATE:

Proposed updates to the mandate, or objects, of the ARIO are a significant expansion of the objectives. The core function of providing advice to the Minister remains, and OFA supports that a key objective for ARIO is to advise the Minister on high-impact, transformational agri-food research and innovation. However, the aspects of establishing programs, consulting with academic and research experts, establishing and strengthening relationships, increasing innovation and commercialization and knowledge translation and transfer are new to the mandate. OFA seeks clarification on how ARIO intends to balance its expanded roles into areas such as innovation and commercialization without compromising its core function of advising the minister. More information is required to understand the anticipated role of ARIO in these new functions. If ARIO's mandate is to expand, the government must ensure that adequate funds and resources are provided to accomplish these expanded responsibilities without comprising ARIO's longstanding core mandate.

OFA appreciates that the mandate expansion will increase collaboration and we support increased engagement of the agri-food sector. Engagement with agriculture organizations, industry and researchers is key for the sector to reach its full potential and ARIO will be more effective in its role with cross sector collaboration. However, to be successful in determining research needs and promoting research opportunities, farmers must be recognized and included as key participants, not merely consulted stakeholders. OFA recommends ARIO engage directly with farmers and producer organizations on research needs and objectives as a key priority and

indicate that this is necessary for the sector to reach its full potential with respect to agri-food research.

OFA is also concerned about how the increased function of the ARIO will be delivered, without negatively affecting the core mandate or duplicating existing processes. No additional resources, staff allocation or expansion of the Board is proposed, so the capacity to effectively deliver on an expanded mandate is of concern. It will be imperative that an expanded mandate consider existing programs, initiatives and processes in the agri-food research space, within and outside OMAFRA, and that ARIO consider and compliment such programs, rather than duplicate, to make best use of limited resources.

Including the encouragement and facilitation of knowledge translation and transfer into the mandate is promising, but efforts here must align with, and provide compliment to, the existing ecosystem of agriculture research. More information is needed to better understand how this proposed change will effectively improve research outcomes and knowledge sharing in the province. OFA strongly recommends that ARIO's specific role with respect to knowledge translation and transfer needs to be clearly defined to compliment rather than compete with the role of other organizations in the sector, particularly the role that OMAFRA plays in this area.

RESEARCH LANDS & INFRASTRUCTURE:

Further, OFA is concerned that the core function of overseeing the existing ARIO-owned research properties and related infrastructure is missing from the newly proposed mandate. It is clear in Bill 155 that the authority to own and manage property remain, however removing this core function from the mandate is concerning.

The ARIO research station properties and related infrastructure are critical assets, essential to the function of agriculture research in Ontario and vital to the long-term success of the sector. While it is clear in Bill 155 that the power to enter into property and financial agreements, construct and maintain buildings and establish research programs remains, this crucial function must continue as a key part of the ARIO mandate. OFA strongly recommends reinstating this core function as the primary purpose in the ARIO updated mandate.

Given the essential function of the research station properties, ongoing investment in the management and operation of the infrastructure is vital. It is imperative that ARIO have the resources to not only maintain the existing infrastructure, but to invest in the facilities, equipment and technology. ARIO must also maintain the ability to hold funds in trust for such investments when property is divested. Ongoing investment in the research infrastructure will be key to attracting talent and delivering innovation.

REGULATIONS:

Bill 155 adds a provision that allows the Minister to make regulations under the new ARIO Act, with specific references to imposing fees for programs and potential for expanded use of the research station properties. As mentioned, appropriate resourcing for the research centres is critical to creating and maintaining a vibrant, capable and sustainable research sector. However, any expansion of use of these properties must be carefully considered to compliment the core function and not impede the opportunity for conducting innovative agri-food research. OFA maintains that agricultural research must continue to be the fundamental function of the research station properties.

MEMBERSHIP:

Currently the ARIO Board consists of 15 Minister-appointed members and updated governance clauses add a minimum of seven members. No references are made as to how the Board should represent the agriculture sector. OFA wants to emphasize that the updated role of ARIO needs to recognize representatives of the agri-food sector as key partners. This should be reflected by including farmers, producer groups and sector organizations in the composition of ARIO to ensure meaningful engagement, not merely stakeholders to be consulted. OFA recommends the majority of the appointed ARIO Board consist of industry representatives that reflect the diversity of agricultural products produced in Ontario.

RESEARCH PRIORITY SETTING:

The need to have a formalized mechanism for sector input into government priority setting for agri-food research is critical, and yet it does not currently exist in a functional, holistic way in Ontario. Developing this mandate would require additional detail, sector engagement and

OMAFRA involvement to establish a process that could be supported. With ARIO's role in managing critical research infrastructure and oversight of research program, ARIO needs to be connected to a research priority setting process that not only consults with the agri-food sector but engages farmers and producer organizations as key stakeholders. OFA envisions this as part of a larger priority-setting process that involves all commodities and partners in the sector, addresses the needs of value chain and looks beyond Ontario borders in order to effectively implement innovation. More work is needed to establish such a process, and OFA would be pleased to contribute.

SUMMARY:

ARIO's core function needs to continue to focus on the research station properties and infrastructure, and appropriate resourcing is needed to attract talent, update equipment and technology and deliver innovative research programs. OFA sees ARIO in a coordinating role that enables and participates in priority-setting for impactful investment in research and innovation, with producer and commodity representation and cross-sector collaboration. This would ensure the right infrastructure and equipment exists to support world-class research that enhances the sustainability and profitability of the Ontario agri-food sector, aligning with the Grow Ontario Strategy. To achieve this, OFA expects that ARIO will maintain its ability to enter into property and financial agreements respecting lands, construction and maintenance of infrastructure and buildings that support and foster agricultural research and innovation.

Similarly, OFA also recommends that ARIO plays only a supporting role in enabling knowledge translation and transfer, as well as encouraging commercialization and supporting business and market development, to compliment rather than overlap with the well-established and proven work of OMAFRA and others in the sector.

OFA advocates for greater investment in agri-food research, both direct public investment as well as incentives and support for private sector research and development. Agri-food research should be developed based on demand, and knowledge should be transferred to industry to use in a timely and effective manner.

An opportunity exists for ARIO to position itself as an effective conduit between industry, academia and producers, facilitating an ongoing collaborative, cross-sector dialogue on producer needs in agri-food research. Providing a multi-stakeholder view, the outcome of this critical dialogue could form the basis of a holistic plan to not only maintain but grow the agri-food research sector and address research asset needs and fill critical gaps in the current system. This would provide a mechanism that prioritizes research conducted at ARIO research facilities and would make best use of the critical infrastructure.

Thank you.