

September 18, 2015

Hon Jeff Leal,
Minister of Agriculture, Food and Rural Affairs
1421 - 99 Wellesley Street W 1st Floor,
Whitney Block,
Toronto M7A 1W3

Dear Minister Leal,

We are pleased that the 2014 Premiers' Mandate letter to the Ontario Ministry of Agriculture and Food directed the creation of a "Farms Forever" program to help ***"preserve the productive capacity of agricultural land close to major urban centres, support the local sourcing of food, strengthen Ontario's agri-food sector and support young farmers."***

As organizations with expertise and a mandate in the above areas, Farms at Work, Just Food Ottawa, the Golden Horseshoe Food and Farming Alliance and the Ontario Farmland Trust have been developing a number of strategies that we think would be useful first steps in developing the Farms Forever program. These ideas and recommendations are outlined in the attached document.

While it may be tempting to pick one or two of our ideas for a Farms Forever program, we feel that the strength of our approach lies in the integration of the recommended initiatives. The recommendations offered cover the protection of farmland, employment of youth on farms, access to capital for beginning farmers, support for local sourcing of food, and support for organizations working on-the-ground to address these growing, sector-wide challenges. Taken together, these actions will generate significant impact, with positive spin-offs for local food, farmland, new entrants to agriculture, and farm enterprises in near-urban areas across Ontario.

Solutions to preserving agricultural lands and the productive capacity of those lands are complex and require a multi-faceted approach; this includes ongoing efforts by MMAH to improve land use planning policies, as well as stronger partnerships and leadership from OMAFRA, through Farms Forever, for the lasting and strategic protection of certain public and privately-held farmlands. Movement on this pillar of Farms Forever is important in the short-term, while also making a commitment to the development of longer-term solutions that provide a stable land base for near-urban farms and access to affordable land for new farm start-ups.

While our four organizations have collaborated to develop this concept paper, and have built on other proposals to OMAFRA from the sector (e.g. Ontario Farmland Trust), we know that there are many groups involved in agriculture that would add additional input on the ideas presented. Our recommendations present some ready-to-implement, easy steps toward early success of a provincial Farms Forever program, and are intended to spark discussion with OMAFRA and additional partners about collaborative solutions to some of the biggest challenges ever faced for the sustainability of Ontario agriculture.

We welcome an opportunity to further address our recommendations in person with you and your staff at your convenience.

Thank you for your consideration.

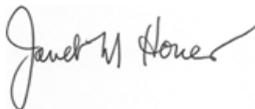
Sincerely,



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Farms Forever Program Recommendations - September 2015

One year ago, Premier Wynne provided your Ministry with the government's priorities for the next four years. Organizations across Ontario working to protect farmland, to support new entrants and to establish local food economies were very pleased to see that the mandate included:

“Creating and implementing the new **Farms Forever Program**. The program will help preserve the productive capacity of agricultural land close to major urban centres, support the local sourcing of food, strengthen Ontario's agri-food sector and support young farmers”.

Solutions to preserving agricultural lands and the productive capacity of lands are complex and will require a multi-faceted approach. Approaches such as the formation of Ontario's Greenbelt and the National Capital Greenbelt have protected the lands but cannot ensure the viability of the farms or access to farmland by new entrants. Access to training, capital, labour, land and support programs is needed to ensure viable farm and food enterprises are created and sustained.

We look forward to the implementation of the Farms Forever Program, and offer the following initial suggestions as part of a simple but critical strategic path for accomplishing the government's goals. These proposals lay solid groundwork for next steps, and should not be seen as a fully comprehensive set of policies. They were developed with the following criteria in mind:

- Proven ideas that build upon existing programs, policy direction
- Economical to implement
- Timely, achievable within a short timeframe
- Impact more than one Farms Forever component
- Integrate with all other recommendations to provide collective impact
- Provide necessary building blocks for next steps

These ideas are also intended to spark discussion with OMAFRA and additional partners across Ontario about collaborative solutions to some of the biggest challenges facing the sustainability of Ontario agriculture.

Six Key Integrated Proposals

1. Incentivize On Farm Summer Work Experience for Ontario Youth

Unemployment and underemployment for youth is at an all time high in Ontario. At the same time, farmers often choose to source off-shore labour in an effort to access a trained, reliable source of farm labour.

In time for the 2016 program, the government could use the existing Ontario Summer Jobs service program as a vehicle to further incentivize farm businesses to hire young Ontario students aged 15 to 30 years. We know that there are many young people who are interested in farm work, but some farms have a hard time paying minimum wage. The current \$2 per hour subsidy has not changed in many years. If it were increased to \$5 per hour for businesses with a Farm Business Registration Number, many more employment opportunities would be created.

The benefits:

- Increased employment in agriculture and food for Ontario youth
- Increased likelihood of future on-farm employment, as a result of on-the-job training received and new awareness of farm employment as a career option
- Increased possibility of new farm enterprise creation, as young Ontarians learn what it means to farm
- Increased opportunities for succession outside of farm families, which almost always begin with on-farm employment
- More dollars spent on farm workers would stay in Ontario
- Ontario's agri-food sector is strengthened and young farmers are supported

Organizations working with new entrants see on-farm work experience as a key driver of economic growth in Ontario's agri-food sector. Ontario programs in the early 1980's targeted at stimulating employment on farms were very successful.

2. Permanently Protect Select Near-Urban Lands for Farming

The Farms Forever program has highlighted both the need for protection of near-urban farmland and also support for new farmers, many of whom plan to produce food and are looking for local market access. To address the growing need for both the greater protection of near-urban Ontario farmland and affordable land access for new entrants, there are a number

of cumulative options that could be considered for implementation, and that do not hinge on the completion of the review of the four provincial land use plans currently being reviewed:

- a) The provincial government is a farmland owner in its own right. Government-owned lands near major urban centres could be inventoried for their suitability for agriculture. Specific parcels could be identified and transferred to a land trust for permanent protection under farmland easements. The Ontario Farmland Trust has a specific mandate for this work.
- b) Work with the Ontario Farmland Trust to identify farmlands already held by land trusts and conservation authorities, and develop partnerships to permanently protect these lands for agriculture, while working with new farmer organizations to ensure access to these lands for new farmers.
- c) Provide support to the Ontario Farmland Trust to purchase/acquire an ideal, strategic farm property in the Eastern Golden Horseshoe (East of Yonge St). Farms at Work, a new farmer organization working in that geographical area, is available to partner, in the same way that Just Food, Everdale and FarmStart have taken on farms located in the west end of the Greater Golden Horseshoe and in Ottawa. These new farmer organizations have had success in facilitating new entrants to start independent farm businesses through these programs.
- d) Work with Ontario Farmland Trust to educate and support retiring farmers in creating farmland easements as part of their farm succession process, making land more affordable to new entrants when farms are sold.

Permanently protected lands near major urban centres would be utilized to support local food production and new farmers through partnerships with well-established organizations supporting new entrants near major urban centres (e.g. Farms at Work, Just Food Ottawa, FarmStart, and Everdale).

The benefits:

- Permanent protection for modest acreages of near-urban farmland in a short timeframe
- Support for training and/or access to land for new farmers interested in urban markets through existing new farmer organizations
- Increased capacity for production of local food close to the market
- Continuing market development

Organizations working on farmland protection and with new entrants see provincial assistance in protecting farmland near urban centres as key to successfully maintaining and enhancing the agri-food sector close to the markets that they serve.

3. Ease Access to Capital for Beginning Farmers

Approximately 50% of Ontario farmers will retire over the next 20 years, while the number of new entrants declines with each new Census of Agriculture. This demographic phenomenon can be expected to have an unprecedented impact on agricultural communities and the agricultural economy in our province. At this point, it is simply critical that programs be put in place to support a new wave of beginning farmers.

Improved access to financing is one aspect of the support required. Traditional lending institutions are reluctant to lend until the farmer has shown a proven track record. While this is a common problem for start-up businesses, and credit-worthiness is essential, other jurisdictions have recognized that agricultural start-ups require special supports.

There are existing programs that are presently underutilized, and the provincial government can play a role in working with financial institutions to ensure that unnecessary barriers are removed. For example:

- a) The Canadian Agricultural Loans Act guidelines specify that “[l]enders must take the same care and prudence in issuing CALA loans as would be taken in conducting ordinary business”. Very few CALA loans have been made in recent years to new farmers in Ontario. Ontario could develop incremental supports to increase access by new farmers to this existing loan program, based on a series of “readiness” tests to substitute as partial evidence of credit-worthiness. New farmer organizations could participate in establishing suitable criteria.
- b) OMAFRA could facilitate a working group (including financial institutions, farm organizations and organizations working with new entrants) across the province to look at additional options to ensure there is genuine access to provide farmers modest funds for capital improvements, equipment and inventory.

The benefits:

- Access to capital will help to kick-start more farm businesses in a shorter timeframe, addressing the need over the next 20 years to increase food production and keep farmland in production.
- Access to capital for beginning farmers is critical to help them scale up their operations more quickly and establish the business viability that traditional lenders are looking for

4. Support Organizations Working to Train and Support New Entrants

In the agriculture sector, core funding has traditionally been raised through commodity-based mechanisms (e.g. check-offs, membership fees) and through money collected from farm businesses to support the three general farm organizations in the province. This funding goes to province-wide organizations with specific mandates and has been a very effective system for supporting them and their members.

However, new entrants and prospective new entrants have no such affiliations, are not yet a part of the sector and often have a limited voice to ask for support. They have limited financial assets from which to draw as start-ups.

The handful of regionally-based organizations working to help them therefore have no access to sector-based funding, and find it very difficult to find matching dollars and support project management internally, even when project funding is available.

There are a couple of simple adjustments that could be made to OMAFRA's existing funding programs that would help organizations with core mandates to support new farmers (and therefore the goals of the Farms Forever program) to accomplish their work.

- a) OMAFRA funding programs could reduce or eliminate the requirement for matching funding if the target sector being supported is new farmers
- b) OMAFRA funding programs could include funding priorities that reflect the goals of the Farms Forever program by specifying new farmer training and supports as a target for funding support

The benefits:

- Given the urgency of supporting new entrants over the next decade, these changes would be significant in kick-starting badly needed additional capacity within the new farmer organizations in the province.
- Regional new farmer organizations can often leverage OMAFRA funding with regional funding sources, providing effective service at relatively low cost

5. Support the Local Sourcing of Food

Interest in local food has exploded across Ontario. This is creating a new need for traceability and origin-specific information, all along the agri-food chain, right through to the final retail or institutional consumer.

The timing is right to support a coordinated verification process available to all Ontario farmers serving local markets. The government could:

- a) Support verification accessible to all Ontario farmers by working with partners to build on components of the Farmers' Markets Ontario MyPick program, and existing commodity-specific traceability programs to create a coordinated and publicly available Ontario farmer verification program. This new program would move beyond farmers' markets to accommodate the full range of market channels for local food.
- b) Promote regional branding with coordinated co-marketing through Foodland Ontario's brand, so that both regional and provincial brands are supported and mutually reinforce each other.

The benefits:

- Increased ability to source local food with confidence.
- Consumer and tourist interest in authentic regional food experiences and terroir would be supported.
- The micro-processing, retail, farmers' markets and hospitality sector's interest in meeting the growing consumer demand for origin-specific information within their products would be possible.
- Cross-Ministerial programs interested in support for the local sourcing of food including the Ministry of Children and Youth Services objective to increase local food purchasing within regional School Breakfast programs and the Ministry of Tourism's interest in regionally-based agro-tourism would be supported.
- Ontario Culinary Tourism Alliance's interest in verifying use of local food by restaurants in the FeastON program would be supported.
- The Greenbelt's Ontario Fresh program's interest in assisting with local food brokerage and local food hub development would be supported.
- Municipal jurisdiction interest in having consistent definition of origin-specific information at regional levels would be met.
- Evaluation of program success for the Local Food Act and other OMAFRA funding programs could be determined.

6. Update OMAFRA Funding Guidelines for Eligible Project Costs

Agriculture is changing in Ontario in many ways. Over the past 10+ years, new non-profit organizations have become established across the province to take on the challenges of supporting new entrants to the sector, protecting farmland and promoting local food system

development – sectors that are the focus of the Farms Forever program. These organizations are small and have very limited access to core funding. They do not fit the mould anticipated by OMAFRA funding programs.

In recent history, funding programs such as Growing Forward, the Local Food Fund and the Rural Economic Development (RED) program have been supportive of incremental project work, but have not been accessible for these organizations, even when they had legitimate projects that the programs were intended to fund.

This is because they have required that funding go to support only new staff positions, or temporary contracts. Small non-profits working in the new areas addressed by the Farms Forever program depend on project funding to keep trained and competent employees in their jobs. These jobs are precarious, and are often held by young people who are building their resumes through work experience in the sector. If they are let go, so that a “new” employee or contractor can be hired to meet the requirements of an OMAFRA grant, then one job has simply been substituted for another. There is no net gain of employment in the province. Worse yet, organizations that are already stretched for capacity have to train and retrain employees, which is a very inefficient use of resources.

We would call on the provincial government to recognize that the more efficient use of funding dollars is through supporting existing precarious employment. Saving a job is the equivalent of creating a job.

We therefore recommend that:

a) OMAFRA amend the eligible and ineligible costs under existing and future funding programs to ensure that organizations that are, and have been, serving OMAFRA’s Farms Forever objectives can access it in meaningful ways. Specifically, at a minimum, funding requests should not be rejected if they support precarious jobs of existing staff who may be working on several projects simultaneously that fund their position.

b) enabling legislation be amended as soon as possible, if necessary

The benefits:

- Employment is retained
- Higher quality opportunities are provided for young staff to build experience
- OMAFRA dollars are used efficiently
- More employees have job stability in food and agriculture
- Sector knowledge is maintained and built upon to move Farms Forever objectives forward more efficiently

We would call on the provincial government to recognize that carrying through on Farms Forever mandate will depend on having strong organizations in place on the ground. We believe that Ontario farmers and the Ontario public would support funding to support those who are working to protect farmland, support new farmers and build our local food systems.