

Farm and Rural Leaders Discuss Resilience to Climate Change at Annual Farmland Forum

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Guelph, ON – Be creative, uncover social capital, protect farmland and support local agriculture. These tips were identified by agricultural and rural leaders at the 2013 Farmland Forum as key elements to building resilience to climate change and rising energy prices in rural Ontario.

Anticipating a future with unpredictable and extreme weather events, and higher energy costs associated with living and working in rural communities, over 120 farmers, elected officials and policy-makers came together at the event to share ideas about how to address these challenges and proactively plan for such uncertainty.

The Forum was organized by the Ontario Farmland Trust, in partnership with the University of Guelph School of Environmental Design and Rural Development. The purpose was to raise awareness of the interconnectedness of a strong farm economy and the strength of rural communities, and to showcase many of the initiatives being led by farmers and community members across the province in response to climate change and energy concerns.

“Following 2012’s intense drought conditions across much of Ontario and the U.S., it was timely to provide a forum that allowed people to meet and discuss local strategies and actions being taken in response to climate change, particularly at that interface between what is happening in the farm sector and more broadly in rural communities,” explains Matt Setzkorn, Acting Executive Director of the Farmland Trust. “We wanted to know: are people understanding the ties between a thriving farm economy, land stewardship and rural resilience?”

Resilience was the buzz word of the day. Huron County Planner, Susanna Reid, defined resiliency as the ability to withstand and recover quickly from stress. She drew from her experience working in Goderich following the 2011 tornado. Reid witnessed the community rallying to support those in need and actively planning for rebuilding an even stronger, more vibrant community. “The response to the Goderich tornado demonstrated the resilience in rural Ontario to respond to unexpected extreme events,” says Reid. “Building resilience requires clear leadership, supporting people’s livelihoods, and learning how to work together.”

Other examples of grassroots community action profiled at the forum included the Eden Mills ‘Going Carbon Neutral’ project and Transition Guelph – groups that are both very active in educating community members about climate change and encouraging everyone to plan for a post-fossil-fuel future for themselves and their neighbourhoods. Local food, local energy production and land conservation are important to these groups’ efforts.

Keynote speaker Jon Scholl of the American Farmland Trust says “North America’s greatest resource is agriculture,” but that sustainability of the farming sector remains a significant concern, particularly in light of climate change and shrinking water availability. Scholl says a major part of resilience for agriculture is preservation of our farmland resources. He emphasized the need to “save farmland by the acre and by the inch”: protect farmland from urban sprawl through strong land preservation programs and protect farming soils from ongoing erosion through good farm stewardship. Scholl says that discussions around climate change in the U.S. have shifted positively

from questioning its existence, to searching for the best way to deal with it from a land conservation and stewardship approach at the farm level.

“To help deal with climate change we can regulate greenhouse gases, subsidize research into transportation and food storage, and pay farmers for their ecological stewardship,” suggests Ted Cowan, Farm Energy Policy Researcher with the Ontario Federation of Agriculture. “We need to open up our range of adaptability for different conditions, and the safest thing we can do right now is to learn, to observe, and to take our foot off the gas pedal.”

Ontario farmers Grant Martin and Kevin Eisses, while having different approaches to managing climate change risks and energy use on their organic and conventional dairy operations, agreed that there is a lot of innovation happening on Ontario farms to improve efficiencies, keep energy costs down, and protect farming soils. As Past President of Innovative Farmers Association of Ontario (IFAO), Eisses says, “We can do a lot to improve our own resiliency, such as developing partnerships and supporting scientific research.” IFAO is a group of farmers that convened in the 1980s and created an organization dedicated to sharing knowledge and experiences related to new practices, on-farm innovation and technologies that advance conservation tillage and farm stewardship.

Reflecting on the day’s conversations, Setzkorn says the Farmland Forum exceeded expectations. “This dialogue was positive and collaborative. People left with a sense that it’s not all doom and gloom, but that the challenges presented by climate change actually give us an opportunity to bring community members together, develop new partnerships, reimagine a sustainable and bright future of our rural areas, and inspire people to actively plan for healthier communities by protecting our local food, water and farmlands.”

Full forum proceedings can be viewed at www.OntarioFarmlandTrust.ca.

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Ontario Farmland Trust – Protecting Farmland Forever

Through policy research, education and direct land securement, the Ontario Farmland Trust works to protect and preserve farmlands and associated agricultural, natural and cultural features of the countryside for the benefit of Ontarians today and future generations. The Farmland Trust was founded in 2004, and is a not-for-profit organization based at the University of Guelph.

The Farmland Trust’s vision is for a future where Ontario’s best farmland is valued and permanently protected through sound policy, partnerships and proactive community engagement, where diverse farming communities thrive, and where the protection of farmland, agriculture and local food production is recognized as the foundation of a sustainable rural economy in Ontario.