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**NEWS RELEASE**

**February 22, 2011**

**Agricultural Development Forum Sparks New Exchange, Collaboration**

**Guelph, Ontario** – Nearly 150 professionals from across Ontario gathered at the University of Guelph last Friday to explore opportunities for collaboration and new policy directions in agricultural economic development.

The February 18th *Renewing Rural Economies: Agricultural Development Forum*, hosted by the Ontario Farmland Trust, brought together municipal planners, economic development officers and councillors, as well as various provincial ministries and the farm community, to cooperatively respond to the complex economic challenges facing Ontario's agricultural sector.

"We need greater recognition of agriculture's leading role in Ontario's economy," Farmland Trust Executive Director Bruce Mackenzie stated in his opening remarks at the forum. "We need to come together, break down silos and initiate dialogue about the real needs of the sector and what policies are supporting or hindering agricultural development." Mackenzie says the Farmland Trust is hosting the event because farmland and local agriculture should be valued as a part of community economic development, and seen as a major part of revitalizing rural economies.

Many perspectives were brought forward at the forum, including those of farmers, planners, economic development officers, municipal councillors and urban food advocates. Each shared views on their profession's role in agricultural development and support of the sector, all the while receiving friendly criticism from the room. "Planners can often be the greatest barrier to agricultural economic development," Durham Region Agricultural Economic Development Officer Marlene Werry said. "They have to make a greater effort to learn about the needs of the sector."

"Communications leads to knowledge, which leads to sound decisions," Perth County Planner Dave Hanly added. "That's why it's so important to have events like this that facilitate information exchange – all too often we get caught looking at individual trees and not the forest."

Nick DeBoer, Caledon farmer and councilor encouraged forum participants to consider the uniqueness of agriculture in their community, municipality or region, using local definitions of "value-added" farm activities as an example of the need for localized agricultural policies. "Take time to listen to farmers, don't just give advice from your office," was one of DeBoer's key messages.

Peter Lambrick, a farmer from Halton Region said, "Farmers and groups of farmers are encouraged to add value and scale up investments, but they need to be treated fairly in this process. They need assurance from planners, EDOs and the province that businesses will be allowed to start small and won't be taxed out of existence." Effective dialogue with mutual respect can be achieved through a local or regional Agricultural Advisory Committee, Lambrick added.

Lauren Baker, Toronto Food Policy Council coordinator, emphasized the growing importance of cross-sectoral platforms at municipal and provincial levels that bring unlikely players together in support of economic development in agriculture. Many groups are now linking health, agricultural development, environment and municipal sustainability targets, among other things, Baker said. “Food policy consists of both actions and *in-actions* by government that influences the supply, quality, price, production, distribution and consumption of food.”

In an afternoon panel, when discussing rural economic development in light of future challenges of climate change and peak oil, Paul Nichol of the Huron Business Development Corporation, stated, “We’re already doing our best (improving production, food safety, and environmental standards), but is being the best good enough?”

“We have to look forward through the windshield, not back through the rear view mirror,” Dan Taylor, Price Edward County EDO, chimed in. “Politicians tend to be risk adverse and look back, and this ends up being how our policy develops. Planners and EDOs have to be forward thinking when preparing for the future of farming and agricultural development, not backwards to yesterday.”

Overall, a common theme arose from the day’s discussion: planners, economic development officers, the province and the farm community could all do a better job of being advocates for Ontario agriculture.

“We’re looking forward to seeing what comes out of the discussions today,” said Matt Setzkorn, Farmland Trust staff person and forum coordinator. “We hope the conversations that happened at this forum will help inform future policy directions and identify new research needs related to agricultural development in Ontario.”

Forum proceedings will be available and posted on the Trust’s website. The *Renewing Rural Economies: Agricultural Development Forum* is part of the Farmland Trust’s *Places to Grow Food* project. More information can be found at [www.OntarioFarmlandTrust.ca](http://www.OntarioFarmlandTrust.ca).

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**Ontario Farmland Trust – *Protecting Farmland for Farmers***

*Through 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 to improve the quality of life for current and future generations.*

*Founded in 2004, the Ontario Farmland Trust is a registered not-for-profit organization whose vision is for an Ontario that includes a healthy and vibrant agricultural landscape that provides a safe and local supply of food for all Ontarians now and in the future.*