

Ontario Farmland Trust 2008 Farm Preservation Forum:
Land for the Next Generation of Ontario Farmers
April 17, 2008

Conference Summary

Proceedings

1. Morning Speaker Panel
2. Morning Group Work: Strengths, Challenges, Key Initiatives
3. Afternoon Speaker Panel
4. Afternoon Group Work: Expanding on the key initiatives

1. Morning Speaker panel

John Baker, Administrator, Beginning Farmer Center, Iowa

Peter Coughler, Succession Planning and Business Agreements Program Lead, OMAFRA

Christie Young, Director, FarmStart

2. Morning Group Work: Strengths, Challenges, Key Initiatives

- a) What extant strengths can we draw from in building a sustainable local food system and creating access for new farmers to Ontario farmland?
- b) What challenges will we have to confront?
- c) What key initiatives will we need to pursue in order to move forward on this issue?

a) Primary strengths:

- o Excellent agroecological conditions
- o Growing public desire to support sustainable local food systems, buy local
- o With rising fuel costs/climate change, local food is economical, ecological choice
- o Proximity to urban markets, infrastructure in place to move goods and knowledge
- o New opportunities for farmers to connect with new markets: meeting GTA ethnocultural communities' demand for new niche market foods.
- o Access to credit, well developed credit market
- o Institutional (public, private, and voluntary sectors) will to support a healthy local food system
- o Institutional capacity to support sustainable agriculture; growing network among new farmer service providers/ agricultural organizations; strong Farm communities, organizations and associations
- o Beginning farmers' enthusiasm, energy, creativity

- Interest in farming among people from non-traditional farming backgrounds
- Excellent agricultural knowledge pool
- Quebec example – Agricultural land protected, start up grants (Up to \$40K)
- ON has the Greenbelt and land available for farm start up – lots of offerings of land, huge amounts of land available in developers and drs and lawyers hands. FarmStart has been offered access to thousands of acres
- Commitment on part of land owners to have land continue to be farmed

b) Primary challenges:

- Regulatory costs: prohibitive to small- to medium-scale farmers and processing plants (also large scale farmers)
- Rural farm and food processing infrastructure is inadequate, disappearing – abattoirs and canning plants
- Best farmland is being lost, price of remaining land is rising with development/sprawl; Greenbelt is not big enough
- Farmers need to develop many new skills – production, marketing, financial, managerial... Each new farmer cohort has its strengths and weaknesses.
- Lack of templates and models for new land lease agreements.
- Finding compromise between needs of retiring farmers and new farmers – transition issues
- Lack of effective gov't support for new farmers
- Accommodation: land is available, but housing? Where do new farmers live?
- Access to capital for new farmers
- Access to land that fits new farmers' diverse goals –e .g. affordable land that is close to urban areas/small regional centres (for access to niche markets, attractive near-urban lifestyle).
- Globalization, supermarket monopolies drive down price of food; place barriers b/w local farmers and local markets.
- Access to specialized knowledge – how accessible are OMAFRA field staff? New farmers don't know where to go for information.
- Quota cost
- Instability of farm income
- Hard for new farmers to break into institutional markets – challenges around aggregation/scaling up
- Lack of political voice for farmers, who make up only 2% of population
- No 'right to farm' legislation
- Farmers are sometimes own worst enemies – old farmers advise against entering farming.

c) Five key initiatives to address the Issue of 'Land for the Next Generation of Ontario Farmers' :

- i. Finances, tools and legal issues
- ii. Research
- iii. Policy and regulations
- iv. Relationships and linkages
- v. Networking and strategic alliances

3. Afternoon Speakers

Angie Koch , Farmer, Fertile Ground CSA

Ahmed Bilal – World Crop Agronomist, FarmStart

Comment from Joe Dickenson, Junior Farmers of Ontario:

We need to make sure new farmer programs include all new farmers, not just first generation farmers but new farmers with agricultural backgrounds too.

4. Afternoon Group Work: Expanding on the key initiatives

i. Finances, New Tools and Legal issues

Key tasks:

- Create new loans for new farmers, subsidized interest rates
- Modernize zoning: reduce 100 acre minimum, come up with a local agricultural zone for smaller units
- Reform land valuation process to cut down on speculation

Key resources required:

- Money
- Gov't support
- Advocacy and support from nonprofit sector

ii. Research

Key Tasks:

- Inventory agricultural land available or accessible to new farmers (for potential lease, in incubator farms, for potential sale).
- Develop a of set of criteria for assessing agricultural potential, or suites of criteria for different ag uses.
- Define and inventory new farmers. Some research has been done in USA on new farmers' needs – build on this in Canadian context.
- Inventory current arrangements re: land use strategies and how these are working or not working.
- Build on the above initiatives to research other models of land access internationally, like urban agriculture, etc., and the success of these models.
- Ongoing: provide a baseline that can be continually updated by monitoring changes to the inventories over time.

Resources Required:

Funding, researchers, networks of research institutions (private research consortiums), gov't involvement on provincial, federal and municipal, regional. Involving other organizations

Comments from the floor:

- We need to evaluate government programs and policy re: new farmer support. There are some programs in place to help new farmers; how are they doing? A comparative study would reveal differences b/w QC and ON – policies and results.

iii. Policies and Regulations

Key Tasks:

- Policies to facilitate long term leases
- Support for on-farm processing
- Regulations that permit building second dwellings on farms
- Incentives for easements
- Incentives for non-farmer rural owners to rent their farmland to new farmers
- Support for agrominiums and coops

Resources:

SWAT team of six people – a working group to put together a proposal to government.
Interministerial brief

Questions from the floor:

- What about cheap food policies
- A policy being considered in QC: tax rebates withheld from speculators who allow their land to grow up in brush. In ON, the land has to be farmland for this to be effective.
- Lands Transfer Tax – decrease it for farmers or make them exempt; this may encourage retiring farmers to leave the farm sooner.
- In the past, concern that agrominiums could disguise urban sprawl (residential development with some kind of farming component). Agrominiums work well on land already zoned for urban development, harmful if done in land already protected in agricultural zoning. Good way to recoup urban farmland.

Policies (2nd group)

Key Tasks:

- Introduce new package for new farmers, including mentoring.
- Form an advocacy or strategic alliance group
- Agricultural Policy Framework up for renewal, changes to policy
- Draw inspiration from other countries or provinces
- Engage speakers or media savvy people
- Start a letter writing campaign

Resources:

Groups with know-how and credibility on these issues: FarmStart and OFT, etc.

iv. Networking and Strategic Alliances

Key Tasks:

- Identify all possible ON stakeholders on land access issue, bring them together to work on needs and opportunities (e.g. weekend intensive session)
- Choose an administrator for a landlink program to act as a hub to disseminate information provincially, work closely with regional groups from the ground up to bring together resources and to act as 'go to' people for farmers and new farmers

Key resources:

- Funding
- Willing stakeholders – non-profits, academics, gfos

v. Relationships and Linkages

Key Tasks:

- Build a regional FarmLINK network of organizations who understand regional issues, land types, and how to negotiate relationships with regional actors.
- Connect new farmers with retiring farmers through an online strategy.
- Promote initiatives to connect new farmers with landowners/retiring farmers: a media campaign for young farmers, connect to new immigrant farmers through ethno-cultural community leaders.
- Support productive relationships b/w new farmers and retiring farmers/landowners by applying research on new farmer needs etc., developing guidelines and checklists and templates.
- Sit down with people to walk through the process – personal consultation.

Resources:

- Funding
- People with local knowledge
- Orgs/people with capacity to support relationships
- Training for new farmer support workers.

Comments:

- Regional Hubs and local people knowing their situation needs to inform the research piece re: inventory of farmland – more needs to be done on a regional basis than on a provincial one.
- New farmers can draw from guidance from people within their own peer groups when trying to develop relationships. For example, Junior Farmers Association of ON can provide contacts and information from young farmers.

Summary

The presentations and discussion at this year's conference reinforced those at our conference last year, focusing particularly on how we can support new young farmers getting into production. Although access to land is probably the biggest barrier, many other means of support can be tackled.

The conference allowed discussion of:

- alternative means to support new and young farmers,
- means to encourage a sustainable local food system,
- issues in providing access to land through better land use regulations.

To these three fundamental concerns was added the need to work together in a strategic alliance to make progress on these critical issues. In the months since the conference occurred, great progress has been made in moving toward such an alliance, known as the FarmON Network – see the FarmLINK website, at www.farmlinkontario.ca.