



Conference proposes innovative steps toward farmland preservation and farm viability in Ontario

April 17, 2007 | Guelph, ON – “Places to Grow **Food**” was the theme of this year’s Farmland Preservation Conference hosted by the Ontario Farmland Trust, and held April 12th and 13th at the University of Guelph. The conference also included the first ‘local food dinner’ put on for a conference at the University.

The conference explored many issues related to farmland preservation and farm viability, but focused on three particular issues important to the future of farming in southern Ontario:

1. Local food marketing initiatives – urbanites are increasingly looking for the opportunity to purchase ‘local food’ and reduce ‘food miles’. For farmers who choose to move in this direction, local food production can be one route to economic viability, while also helping to reconnect the urban consumer with farmers and the countryside.
2. New directions in land use planning for agriculture – although the Planning Act has been strengthened, and both the Greenbelt and growth management legislation has been passed, there is still much to do to ensure agricultural viability. Municipalities can undertake a number of supportive programs to enhance agriculture at the local level.
3. Support for immigrant, new and young farmers entering the industry –new Canadians, young people, and adults switching careers wish to try farming, at least on a small, near-urban scale. The next generation within farm families often hopes to take over their family farms. In all cases, costs make it almost impossible. There are specific programs that could be developed to support these potential new, immigrant and next generation farmers.

The Ontario Farmland Trust believes that these issues and others could be built into a provincial strategy to support both farmland preservation and the viability of the farm industry. The Trust will continue to sponsor dialogue toward a ‘Places to Grow Food’ plan over the coming year.

The conference featured over 20 speakers who addressed a variety of topics, from case studies of local food marketing and education for children, to the challenge of protecting the ‘whitebelt’ of good farmland outside the urban belt of the Golden Horseshoe, but inside the boundary of the Greenbelt. In the final plenary session, a list of practical recommendations was developed.

Land Use Planning:

1. Society needs to value farmland for its unique soil and productivity value, especially the variety of crops that can be grown in southern Ontario, and not just for development at market value.
2. Municipalities need to understand that residential development is a drain on the tax base, while agriculture makes a positive financial contribution in comparison.
3. The Ontario Municipal Board should be given a mandate to ensure that development proposals on prime farmland outside urban boundaries are not approved.
4. As much as possible, efforts should be made to redirect urban growth in southern Ontario away from centres located in the middle of prime agricultural regions.

Local Food Production and Marketing:

5. Programs to support value-added processing or marketing at the farm level should be established, including transition funding and appropriate assessment designations.
6. Innovative programs to support the pooling of resources among farmers to increase local food marketing should be developed and encouraged.
7. The benefits of local food consumption should be promoted.
8. Best practices for supporting agriculture at the municipal level should be developed and promoted, based on outstanding success stories among current municipalities.
9. Innovative alternate land-holding arrangements - from farm partnerships to 'agrominiums' - should be investigated, to support land access for new farmers at reasonable cost.
10. All relevant federal and provincial government agencies and policies should be harmonized to support innovation in local food production and marketing, and avoid inadvertent barriers.
11. Programs to support local food production should be linked to programs that support payments for ecological goods and services.

Support for New, Immigrant and Next Generation Farmers:

12. An innovative suite of new programs such as internships, mentoring and production sharing arrangements, training and incubator farms should be developed to support entering farmers.
13. New Canadians should be encouraged to enter agriculture, and the ethnic market for new crops of value to immigrant communities should be assessed and supported.
14. Innovative means of allowing farm succession between generations must be developed to provide for continuity of family farms where land values are excessively high.
15. Start-up grants and low-interest loans should be provided for new, immigrant and next generation farmers, such as are common in the European community.

We take for granted the unique farmland of southern Ontario, its high quality soils, its amenable climate, and its resiliency as a landscape for agricultural production compared to the rest of Canada (and the world). We leave farmers to worry about the financial viability of the industry. And we take urbanization as inevitable, welcoming the employment it brings.

This status quo needs to change to provide balanced decisions supporting farmland preservation as well as urban growth. The most important means to preserve farmland is to put in place programs that will allow farmers to make a profit, giving them an incentive to continue farming.

- Land use planning needs to move beyond development restrictions to provide positive support for farming and farm viability,
- Local food production and marketing can be one means of supporting farm viability, especially in the near-urban region,
- Programs to support the entry of new, immigrant and next generation family farmers are essential to foster continuous renewal in agriculture.

In spite of our need for urban development, food production is the fundamental value of the landscape of southern Ontario, and the farm community has the expertise to serve us by doing what they do best – producing crops and livestock. The Ontario Farmland Trust will continue to explore ways to support the farmland preservation and farm viability so crucial for a sustainable future in southern Ontario.

For additional information or to arrange interviews please contact:

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BACKGROUND – Ontario Farmland Trust

“The Ontario Farmland Trust was created in response to a need for a land trust specifically for farmers”, stated steering committee member, Jackie Fraser. “There are many land trusts in Ontario dedicated to

protecting environmentally sensitive lands; however there were no options for farmers wanting to protect their land for agricultural purposes.”

Urban sprawl and farmland severances contribute to the loss of thousands of acres of productive farmland in Ontario each year. In the GTA alone, more than 2,000 farms and 150,000 acres – about 18 per cent of Ontario’s Class 1 farmland – were lost between 1976 and 1996.

“Currently the long-term protection of agricultural land is not adequately promoted, either through specific legislation, incentives, or voluntary initiatives”, stated Stew Hilts, Chair of the Ontario Farmland Trust and Chair of the Department of Land Resource Science at the University of Guelph. “The Ontario Farmland Trust will also have a role in research and education about the value of protecting farmland”.

The Trust can help individual farmers voluntarily protect the land they love and ensure that it will remain in agricultural production. Some of the tools that the Trust can use to protect land include agricultural easements or land ownership.

According to Melissa Watkins, acting Executive Director of the Ontario Farmland Trust, “Inadequate farmland protection can have serious consequences on the future of agriculture in Ontario.” She adds, “Farmers have the opportunity to ensure that farmland protection protects both the farmers of today and tomorrow.”

The Ontario Farmland Trust will protect privately owned land “in trust” for the benefit of current and future generations of Ontarians and will work toward policies and programs that support farm viability. The group believes that protecting farmland also helps preserve the broader countryside and its associated values such as air and water quality, which benefits us all. As well it will enable us to choose greater local food production when needed in the future.

More information available at www.farmland.uoguelph.ca/oft/oft.htm.