

# OUR FOOD, OUR FUTURE

SPECIAL MARKETING FEATURE

## AN ENGINE FOR ECONOMIC HEALTH

### AGRICULTURE SECTOR

If the first thing that pops into your mind when someone talks of Ontario farmers is the food they produce, it is time to broaden your horizons. Granted, Ontario farmers are responsible for providing some of the world's healthiest, tastiest fresh fruits, vegetables and meat, but agriculture in the province goes far beyond what ends up on the family dinner table.

Agriculture is Ontario's second-most-important economic driver, right after the auto sector. And while the auto industry may be on shaky ground and retracting, agriculture continues to forge ahead. At the same time, farmers are finding new export products and strengthening our future as an international trader.

Agriculture is a leading innovator in protecting the environment. Ontario farmers are in the forefront when it comes to reducing greenhouse gas emissions, reducing our dependence on pesticides and finding new renewable sources to replace our dependence on fossil fuels.

Agriculture is the main stay of hundreds of small towns and villages. Their futures are directly linked to the ongoing health of farms and the money farmers spend locally

for everything from seed to equipment to new cars.

"You can't underestimate the role agriculture plays in this province," says Rob McLaughlin, associate vice-president of research strategies at the University of Guelph. "Most people still see it the way it was three generations ago. Today, agriculture has changed dramatically and, thanks to research, the role it plays in the economy and in our lives will continue to change dramatically."

That shift starts with what we eat, he says, but then branches into the creation of new products from existing and new crops. Farmers are growing vegetables specially bred to maximize natural disease prevention and infection-fighting substances such as anti-oxidants. They are raising soy beans that can be processed into everything from milk substitutes to auto upholstery. Hemp resin makes plastics; corn stalks replace coal in areas such as power generation; manure becomes a source of methane gas to drive turbines that create electricity and fuel farm machinery.

Bette Jean Crewes of Trenton has had a front row seat to this process of change. As a farmer and now president of the Ontario Federation of Agriculture, she has seen agriculture spread well beyond crops to fill grocery store shelves with seasonal bounty into a huge, all-encom-



Today's agri-food industry is fast becoming one of those sophisticated, science-based, smart sectors that Ontario needs as it retools for the future.

passing industry that touches almost all facets of daily life in Ontario.

"Farmers are very good business people," she says. "They understand the increasingly important role they play and want to make the most of it. Our goal now is to not just to continue to provide safe, healthy foods but to create new products from existing crops, and that includes expanding into areas such as industrial applications.

"At the same time, we are

committed to improving the environment."

Environmental protection is an area where Ontario farmers have made huge advances, says Lillian Schaefer, interim executive director of AGCare, a coalition of crop and horticulture farm organizations that banded together more than 20 years ago to create and embrace environmentally sensitive farming practices.

"Ontario farmers have never before been so environmentally aware or practice

better environmental stewardship," she says.

Among farmers' initiatives have been programs that reduced use of pesticides by 50%, and land-tilling practices — embraced by 66% of Ontario farmers — that greatly reduce soil erosion and depletion of nutrients and minerals, and protect wetlands.

That same program allowed farmers to plough fields less often, which means a reduction in greenhouse gases from farm equipment equal to taking

125,000 cars off the road each year.

An environmental farm plan program subsidized by both the federal and provincial governments allows farmers to learn better environmental stewardship and create action plans for their own farms. Between April, 2005, and March, 2008, Ontario farmers spent \$120-million on improving their practices and received subsidies totalling \$80-million.

Equally important, Ontario farms are preserving the viability and even driving growth in smaller rural centres across Ontario, says Clark Hoskin, manager of tourism and economic development for Norfolk County, a farming centre on the north shore of Lake Erie.

He points out that gross farm receipts in his county grew by 6.8% between 2001 and 2006. While current figures are not available, estimates suggest Ontario farmers pump almost \$8.8-billion a year into the local and regional economies.

"Another indicator is the growth in building permits for work done on farms," he says. "They are up as well, and that means local jobs for construction and local sales of construction materials.

"Agriculture is growing in importance, and its continued success is vital to ensuring Ontario remains a place of both small and large cities, of villages and towns."

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