

# OUR FOOD, OUR FUTURE

SPECIAL MARKETING FEATURE

## AGRICULTURE'S QUIET REVOLUTION

### SECTOR INNOVATIONS

For the past two decades, Ontario's agriculture sector has been in the throes of a quiet revolution. All forms of agriculture in Ontario are involved. But so are universities, the provincial government, food packers and processors and even venture capitalists.

Driving that revolution are tens of millions of dollars spent on research each year; not just on finding better ways to farm — although that is indeed happening — but also on identifying new crops, finding new commercial uses for existing ones and discovering better ways to farm with less impact on the environment.

The result has been a stunning array of innovative value-added products: Foam from soybean-based polyols, technology to reduce our reliance on fossil fuels, milk and eggs with health-preserving benefits such as Omega 3 fatty acids in the form of DHA, the ability to use corn stalks and other biomass left in the field after harvest to replace coal in Ontario's power generating plants and a host of others.

"We have come to understand that agriculture is Ontario's second-largest contributor to the overall economy, after the auto industry, and we are intent on making sure it keeps

pace with the shift in global trade," says Dr. Gwen Zellen, director of the research and innovation branch at the Ontario Ministry of Agriculture Food and Rural Affairs.

"As a result, we are committed to all forms of ongoing research into creating foods that deliver enhanced health benefits and to new value-added products that will drive agriculture forward."

It devotes between \$55-million and \$58-million to research each year and also owns 14 research stations across the province, including a state-of-the-art facility in Vineland.

"Research represents an important investment in the future of the province," Dr. Zellen says. To date, the efforts have focused on a trio of areas: Improving the health benefits of almost all foods, from asparagus to eggs; creating new value-added products with commercial applications, especially in global export markets such as that of soybean foam, which is now used in the seat padding of some automobiles; and creating a seamless chain of research from farmers' fields to supermarket shelves and consumer products.

A shining example of the success of those efforts is the MaRS Landing Project, launched in 2003 to encourage agricultural innovation and help find new commercial applications for the things Ontario farmers produce.



Ontario's agriculture industry encompasses creating foods that deliver enhanced food benefits and new, value-added products that will drive the industry forward.

Its brief targets three areas, says executive director John Kelly: agriculture, food and human health, working with early-stage entrepreneurs and companies and the linkage into the MaRS Discovery District in Toronto.

MaRS Landing scours the world for the best in research, helps farmers apply that research to their own operations and then works with them to find new and existing companies that will create new commercial applications for those farm products.

"In the past two years alone we have worked with more than 80 opportunities,"

Dr. Kelly says. "About 90% of those projects are still underway and are achieving remarkable results."

They include new ventures such as Vinifera for Life, which produces food additive powder from the skins of grapes that have been crushed in the winemaking process. The powders contain all of the natural anti-oxidants of grapes and are now used in breads, rolls and even pizza dough.

There is also Persall Naturals, a company that cold-presses oils from crops such as soybeans and canola and sells them through specialty grocery stores and companies that cre-

ate gift baskets, and Flamglo Foods, which has come up with a line of yogurts and cream cheeses made from soybeans.

"The bio-economy is a new field that is at about the same stage as the IT sector was in 1985; it is at the starting point of a steep curve that will revolutionize our dependence on fossil fuels," Dr. Kelly says. "We can already reproduce those long carbon chains found in petroleum with farm products, and are now well into finding new commercial applications."

The five Ontario counties on the north shore of Lake Erie that make up the Erie Sand Basin are an example of

this new approach to agriculture, says Harold Schooley, research chair of the Ontario Food and Vegetable Growers Association. The area was home to the province's tobacco industry, and farmers are now looking at ways to replace that once-valuable crop.

"We don't want to replace tobacco with more production of traditional fresh fruit and vegetables like strawberries, sweet corn, asparagus or broccoli," he says. "All that would do is flood the market and drive prices down, further reducing farm incomes."

"What we are looking for are either innovative new products or innovative ways to use existing ones to create new markets for what we grow."

To that end, the association will hire an expert well-versed in research, farming and, most importantly, the commercialization of farm products.

"We have all kinds of new technology available to use now, such as ways to flash-freeze individual vegetables. What we need to do is identify those that have the greatest commercial potential and then to find new or existing companies interested in capitalizing on them," he says.

"At stake are not just the farmers themselves but scores of small towns and villages where farming is the heart of the local economy. It is a challenge we can't afford to ignore. Too much is at stake."

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